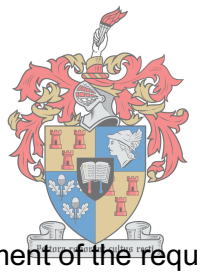
INCONCEIVABLE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDFREE LESBIAN COUPLES

NICOLE ATTRIDGE



Thesis presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Psychology) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University.

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March 2018

Declaration

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Abstract

Lesbians have historically neither been associated with motherhood nor considered fit to parent. However, in recent decades in an increasing number of countries, including South Africa, lesbian couples have obtained the legal rights to and increasing opportunities for motherhood. Despite these changes that make motherhood an accessible status for lesbians, as well as the prevailing beliefs that all women inherently aspire to motherhood, many lesbian couples choose to remain childfree. There is limited research regarding the latter group of women, and this present study therefore aimed to address this gap.

This exploratory study adopted a feminist social constructionist framework and focused on exploring childfree lesbian couples' constructions of their childfree status. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten white, middle-class, childfree lesbian couples (twenty participants) living in Cape Town, South Africa. Carol Gilligan's Listening Guide method was then applied to conduct an analysis of the participants' accounts. The analysis identified two major contrapuntal voices, each made up of three minor voices. Firstly, the Conscious Voice, made up of No Maternal Instinct; Obstacles; and An Alternative Path. Secondly, the Covert Voice, consisting of Unnatural; If I Could Have, I Would Have; and Inequality.

The analysis found underlying conflicts between the participants' Conscious and Covert voices reflecting the contradictions in their personal lives, as well as within the South African context in which they conduct their public lives. The Conscious voice conveyed a lack of felt desire for a child and the practical barriers lesbian couples need to overcome in order to have a child. However, the Covert voice suggested that their childfree status was less about choosing not to have children, and more about struggling to construct a lesbian motherhood alternative to the perceived ideal of heteronormative parenting in South Africa. A significant finding was that, despite asserting self-aware lesbian identities, their constructs of motherhood and parenting were still strongly influenced by heteronormative discourses and a pronatalist context. These findings suggest that although the participants lead meaningful and satisfying lives without the experience of motherhood, much more still needs to be done to expand alternative constructions of motherhood, parenthood and families before lesbian couples will be offered an equal social context in which they can consider motherhood without the conscious and unconscious barriers that are posed by hegemonic heteronormative constructions.

Opsomming

Histories is lesbiërs nie geassosieer met moederskap of geskik geag vir ouerskap nie. Oor die afgelope dekades het lesbiese pare egter wel in verskeie lande, ook in Suid-Afrika, wetlike regte tot ouerskap verkry, asook toenemende geleenthede vir moederskap. Ten spyte van hierdie veranderinge wat moederskap toeganklik vir lesbiërs maak, asook die heersende oortuigings dat alle vroue begeer om moeders te wees, kies baie lesbiese pare om kindervry te bly. Daar is beperkte navorsing aangaande laasgenoemde groep vroue en hierdie studie het ten doel gehad om hierdie leemte aan te spreek.

Hierdie verkennende studie is gegrond in ‘n feministies sosiaal konstruktionistiese raamwerk. In-diepte onderhoude is gevoer met tien wit, middelklas, kindervrye lesbiese pare (twintig deelnemers) woonagtig in Kaapstad, Suid-Afrika. Carol Gilligan se “Listening Guide” metode is gebruik om hierdie data te ontleed. Die analise het twee hoof kontrapuntale stemme geïdentifiseer wat elk uit drie onderliggende stemme bestaan. Die Bewuste Stem bestaan uit die volgende onderliggende stemme: Geen Moedersinstink; Hindernisse; en ‘n Alternatiewe Pad. Die Verskuilde Stem bestaan uit die volgende onderliggende stemme: Onnatuurlik; As ek kon, sou ek; en Ongelykheid.

Die analise het konflikte tussen die deelnemers se Bewuste en Verskuilde Stemme uitgewys wat die teenstellings in hulle persoonlike lewens, sowel as binne die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks waarin hulle hul publieke lewens gevoer het, weerspieël het. Die Bewuste Stem het die gebrek aan ‘n gevoelde begeerte vir ‘n kind, asook die praktiese versperrings wat lesbiese pare moet oorkom ten einde ‘n kind te hê, aangedui. Die Bewuste Stem het egter uitgelig dat hul kindervrye status nie soveel te make het met ‘n keuse om nie kinders te hê nie, maar meer met die problematiek om ‘n lesbiese moederskap konstruksie te skep wat ‘n gelyke alternatief tot die waargenome ideal van heteronormatiewe ouerskap in Suid-Afrika is. ‘n Belangrike bevinding is dus dat die deelnemers se moeder- en ouerskap konstrukte steeds sterk beïnvloed word deur heteronormatiewe diskoerse en ‘n pronatale konteks, ten spyte van hul polities-bewuste lesbiese identiteite. Hierdie bevindings dui daarop dat alhoewel die deelnemers betekenisvolle en bevredigende lewens lei sonder die ervaring van moederskap, daar nog baie meer gedoen moet word om alternatiewe konstruksies van moederskap, ouerskap en gesinne uit te brei voordat lesbiese pare ‘n meer gelyke sosiale konteks sal hê waarbinne hul ouerskap kan oorweeg sonder die bewuste en onbewuste hindernisse wat heersende heteronormatiewe konstruksies meebring

.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals for their contributions:

Dr Elmien Lesch: Thank you for challenging me, for supporting me and for your expertise, mentorship and guidance along this journey. It has been a privilege.

Mireille: Thank you for so many things, through so much.

Sandy: To my favourite person, it is finally time to put the books down. Thank you for your constant support and understanding through all my studies.

Participants: Thank you all for sharing your stories with me. Without you, this research would not have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background to research problem

As an adult lesbian in a long-term, committed relationship, my partner and I are repeatedly asked “when are you going to have children?” This phenomenon would appear to be related to an evolving view of lesbian motherhood. Until recent decades, the idea of a lesbian couple having children was not a possibility, let alone an expectation. However, there seems to be an increasing assumption that as a lesbian couple in South Africa, with the legal rights to and increasing opportunities for motherhood, we would ‘naturally’ choose this path - an expectation that is echoed in the research (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006). What has not been asked, is why many lesbian couples choose not to have children despite the increasing opportunities to do so, as well as the prevailing belief that, as women, they inherently aspire to motherhood.

1.1.1. Woman equals motherhood. Or not?

Motherhood, while not a biological necessity, has traditionally been framed as an experience integral to a women’s identity and central to current gendered expectations for women (Hird, 2003; Mcquillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008; Sevón, 2005). Since the 1960’s, feminist scholars have explored and challenged motherhood, questioning the inherent desire to be a mother, while demonstrating how powerfully assumptions of gender identity merge motherhood and womanhood (Ireland, 1993), and how motherhood remains rooted in the prevalent understanding of female identity (Garwood, 2014; Gillespie, 2003). Feminists challenged this thinking, with some viewing motherhood as simply one aspect of a woman rather than as critical to their identity (Ireland, 1993), while others began describing not only the joy, but also the pain, isolation, and boredom of motherhood (Snitow, 1992). In more recent decades, a movement in feminism called maternal feminism has once again emphasised motherhood as a defining experience, essential to women's identity (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). This maternal feminism (Morell, 2000) seeks to empower women in and through their childbearing capacities and has been termed the new pronatalism, which exerts a strong cultural influence (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004). The use of reproductive technologies has also created previously unimagined choices and opportunities for motherhood. These ongoing debates demonstrate not only how motherhood remains entrenched in our understanding of female identity (Garwood, 2014;

Gillespie, 2003), but also how the meaning of motherhood is both historically and culturally situated.

1.1.2. Lesbians cannot be mothers. Until they can.

Lesbians have historically neither been associated with motherhood nor considered fit to parent. Only since the 1960s have social, legal and technological advancements facilitated motherhood for lesbians (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Rozental & Malmquist, 2015). In the 1970s and 1980s, the term 'lesbian mother' first appeared within the feminist psychological literature, but was viewed by many as incongruent, in contravention with normative heterosexuality. In the 1990s, the number of lesbians becoming mothers - through donor insemination, adoption, fostering, and a variety of co-parenting arrangements - rose sharply (Clarke, 2008). While motherhood and lesbianism are no longer incompatible, and the term 'lesbian mother' is no longer an oxymoron (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999), lesbian mothers still fall outside of the heterosexual norm and are considered by many to be unnatural, immoral, inappropriate and deviant (Suckling, 2010; Wall, 2011).

This perceived deviance, however, appears to be associated more with the lesbian women's lesbian identity than their motherhood identity, with motherhood status sometimes providing social legitimacy (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Bradley & Du Chesne, 2007; Mann, 2007) as they align with the convention of the cultural context in which they live. It seems that the mainstream status of motherhood in some ways counteracts their marginal position as lesbians (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006). Yet, despite their increasing opportunities to access the perceived normative status of motherhood, with the attending positive effects on their marginal identity, lesbian couples are still more likely to remain childfree (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Patterson & Riskind, 2010; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind, Patterson, & Nosek, 2013).

1.1.3. Women choosing to be childfree

While more lesbians have access to motherhood, there is simultaneously an increasing trend of heterosexual women choosing to remain childfree. This trend contradicts the long-standing assumption of motherhood as a predominant female norm and has resulted in a growing number of feminist scholars investigating the phenomenon amongst heterosexual couples (Gillespie, 2003; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Kelly, 2010; Mawson, 2005; Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). These scholars have been less concerned about the causes, focusing

rather on gendered cultural narratives that shape perceptions and experiences of childlessness (Gillespie, 2000; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Morell, 2000). They argue that one way in which culture reinforces gender inequalities is via the support of a gender identity linked to motherhood. Despite this normative assumption of motherhood as the foundation of feminine identity, some women choose to reject motherhood and its association with the prevailing concept of femininity (Kelly, 2010). From this perspective, choosing to be childfree represents an opportunity, for some women, to withdraw from a fundamental component of women's oppression.

While childfree women indicate a profound divergence from predominant pronatalism, the expectation for heterosexual women to have and raise children remains so strong that motherhood seems standard, and voluntarily childfree women are therefore often seen as unnatural and abnormal (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Doyle, Pooley, & Breen, 2013; Kelly, 2010; Letherby & Williams, 1999; Park, 2002; Rich, Taket, Graham, & Shelley, 2011; Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000). Feminist researchers have given voice to these heterosexual women's experiences of being childfree in societies that frequently label them as deviant, selfish and immature (Letherby & Williams, 1999; Letherby, 2002; Moore, 2014; Morell, 2000; Park, 2002). However, missing from the literature are the voices of lesbian couples who choose to be childfree at a time when motherhood is an available status – and particularly given that they live in a society which still conflates motherhood with womanhood. Without their voices, our understanding of women choosing to opt out of motherhood cannot be considered complete, and we risk excluding the experiences and voices of those who do not fit within the dominant heterosexual norms.

1.2. Research aims

Therefore, this study aimed firstly, to conduct an exploratory study of lesbian couples who, despite their opportunities for motherhood, choose to be childfree. Secondly, to contribute towards a more refined understanding of lesbian couples and the ways in which they challenge predominant assumptions of womanhood. Thirdly, to include the voices of those who do not fit within the dominant heterosexual norm, thereby providing an understanding of a more diverse group of women who choose to opt out of motherhood.

1.3. Significance of the research

The findings produced by this research contribute towards addressing the gap in the current limited literature on childfree lesbian couples. In addition to the academic significance of

the study, the findings will also benefit therapists, social workers, counsellors and others working with lesbian couples, by increasing their understanding of the experiences, concerns and motivations for lesbian couples choosing to remain childfree.

1.4. Scope of limitations

This research study, while focused in terms of its specific question, is located within a universal area of knowledge where multiple academic disciplines converge, including psychology, sociology and gender studies. It adopted a feminist social-constructionist lens to explore individual and dyadic ideas and processes in white[1], middle-class, South African lesbian couples with regards to their decisions to remain childfree. While an attempt was made to include key sociological and gender study research, the majority of literature referred to in chapter 3, was limited to that which was delineated by the chosen theoretical framework and methodology, as outlined in chapters 2 and 4. The sample was limited in size and is not assumed to be representative beyond the parameters of what is outlined in the methodology. This study aimed to provide insight and understanding into voluntary childfree lesbian couples in their own right, therefore, no attempt has been made to compare these findings with those of heterosexual couples.

1.5. Definitions of key concepts

1.5.1. Childfree

A variety of terms are used by scholars to identify women who choose not to parent, including 'voluntary childless', 'intentionally childless', 'non-mother', 'childless by choice' and 'childfree'. Language used to define those who had not had children, previously existed only in terms of a deficiency or lack of motherhood, as in 'infertility' or 'childlessness' (Gillespie, 2003). The term childless is often used in relation to women who have no children due to circumstance, and the term has been criticised for implying loss, deficiency and denoting a woman with something missing from her life (Letherby, 2002; Park, 2005). The term 'childfree' was first used in 1972 by the National Organisation for Non-Parents and takes an opposing stance to 'childless', since the former refers to those who choose not to have children despite potentially having the opportunity and means to do so, while

[1] The use of so-called racial categories is contentious because of its link to past apartheid practices, however, these terms are still used to self-identify and/or address past inequalities. Furthermore, these categories still underpin current social structures and practices in South Africa.

the latter usually indicates those who want to be parents but, for a variety of reasons, cannot (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008). The term 'childfree' refers to people who have made the conscious voluntary decision not to have children and have simply chosen a different path than others, one that does not include procreation. While the term has been criticised by some who see it as artificial, suggesting carelessness, a childlike lack or responsibility or a dislike of children (Letherby, 2002; Park, 2005; Peterson & Engwall, 2013), the term 'childfree' has also been used by others who emphasise that childlessness can be an active, positive and fulfilling choice (Gillespie, 2003; Letherby, 2002; Park, 2005). However, as Peterson and Engwall (2013) highlight, the use of 'childfree' should not be seen as implying that all experiences of being childfree are unambiguous or positive.

In line with recent researchers (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Doyle et al., 2013; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Mezey, 2008a; Moore, 2014; Pelton & Hertlein, 2011; Peterson & Engwall, 2013), I choose to use the term 'childfree' as it neither positions 'mother' as the norm nor suggests a lack or deficiency, but rather emphasises the voluntary nature of the decision not to have children.

1.5.2. Lesbian

As highlighted by Tate (2012), there has been a recurring focus on providing a working definition of the term 'lesbian' for the past twenty-five years. In an attempt to counter the narrow view of woman who identify as lesbian, some scholars have argued for a broader definition including trans and gender-queer identities into lesbian social spaces (Tate, 2012), while others have defined lesbians more narrowly as "a woman whose primary sexual and affectional attractions are to other women and who has a sexual minority identity, that is, recognises through the use of language that her sexual orientation places her apart from a sexual mainstream" (Brown, 1995, p. 9). Considering the research objective of this study, I have chosen to adopt the narrower definition and, therefore, define a lesbian as a woman who self-identifies as having sexual, emotional, and relational attachments to other women, and who is sexually attracted to other women over time and across situations. While I use the term 'lesbian' in the context of this study, on a personal level I resist using this term when referring to myself, and prefer the term 'gay', which feels more like an adjective describing one aspect of my identity, and less a noun, labelling who and what I am. Considering that 'gay' is a term commonly used to refer either specifically to homosexual men, or more generally to both non-heterosexual men and women, I use the term lesbian here for clarity.

1.5.3. Heteronormativity

For nearly fifty years feminists have elaborately deconstructed what constitutes 'real men' and 'real women', but despite these ongoing challenges, heteronormative gendering continues to be upheld across multiple contexts (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Heteronormativity is a term that was first coined in 1991 by Michael Warner, an American social theorist, and is defined by the American Psychological Association as, "the assumption that heterosexuality is the standard for defining normal sexual behaviour and that male-female differences and gender roles are the natural and immutable essentials in normal human relations" (VandenBos, 2015, p. 492). According to some social theorists, this assumption is fundamentally embedded in and legitimises, social and legal institutions that devalue, marginalise and discriminate against those, such as lesbians, who deviate from its normative principles (VandenBos, 2015). Oswald, Blume and Marks (2005) describe heteronormativity as being socially constructed via the constructs of gender, sexuality and family, and often supported by claims that heterosexuality should be the standard sexual practice due to its prevalence. Heteronormativity then becomes the implicit moral system surrounding the practice of heterosexuality (Oswald et al., 2005). This is in agreement with Kitzinger (2005) who describes heteronormativity as referring to the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is the result of a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon. While Oswald, Blume and Marks (2005) describe heteronormativity as an ideology that promotes gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be, Kitzinger (2005) believes that heteronormativity is expressed through people's actions, rather than their beliefs, ideologies, or faiths and refers to a culture in which heterosexual norms are supported, while homosexuals are labelled as wrong, and their rights obscured. This study adopts the definition put forward by Oswald, Blume and Marks (2005), whereby heteronormativity is a social construct, founded on the belief that heterosexual behaviour and gender constructs should be normative.

1.6. Brief chapter overview

In Chapter 2 I outline the underlying epistemological assumptions and main features of the theoretical framework adopted for this study, namely feminist social constructionism. The social construction of gender, sexuality, lesbians, motherhood and voluntary childfree women are also briefly discussed. Chapter 3 reviews the literature regarding lesbian couples, motherhood, lesbian motherhood, motherhood as access to heteronormative status, voluntary childfree heterosexual couples and lesbians choosing not to be mothers.

The research design and methodology used for this study are discussed and outlined in detail in Chapter 4, followed by the findings and analysis of the results in Chapter 5. In closing, Chapter 6 presents a discussion of the findings, the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

Our knowledge and understanding of what it means to be a woman, a mother, a lesbian, childfree, has changed considerably over time, emphasising that our associated meanings are historically, socially and culturally dependent. Therefore, when conducting exploratory research into the experiences of lesbian couples choosing childlessness over motherhood, the context in which these women are situated, and how we collectively prescribe meaning, is of critical importance and needs to be taken into account. Adopting feminist social constructionism as a theoretical framework meets these needs. Firstly, I will provide a brief outline of feminist research. Secondly, I will discuss feminist social construction, its underlying epistemological assumptions, and main features. Finally, I will discuss the social construction of gender, sexuality, lesbians, motherhood and voluntary childfree women.

2.2. Feminist research

The origins of feminist research's epistemological focus recognise the importance of women's lived experiences to the aim of bringing subjugated knowledge to light. Feminist perspectives also challenge claims to knowledge by those who occupy privileged positions (Hesse-Biber, 2012) while seeking to produce stronger, more truthful results through documenting those women's lives and experiences that have previously been marginalised or omitted (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004). Feminist research challenges the norms that oppress women lives by chronicling their experiences and concerns, and by focusing on heteronormative stereotypes and gender biases (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). At its core, feminist research is designed to enhance women's voices and to examine alternative ways of gaining knowledge of the world through their experiences (Gergen, 2008), while fostering empowerment for women and other marginalised groups (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007). It is also critical that feminist research highlight the complexity and diversity of women's lives and choices and thereby continues to challenge and highlight inflexible traditional discourses of womanhood (Hadfield, Rudoe, & Sanderson-Mann, 2007). Feminist scholarship has focused attention on the unrealistic assumptions ingrained in the gendered narratives that shape women's lives. Nowhere is this more evident than in the narratives related to reproduction and the experiences and expectations of motherhood.

The exclusion of an accurate reflection of women's experience and perspectives from research drove early feminist scholars to find solutions. By highlighting the invisibility of their experiences in research as well as the contradictions between lived experiences and mainstream research findings, feminists launched a powerful criticism of one of the most broad-reaching paradigms, positivism, arguing that qualitative approaches were more likely to respect and acknowledge the experiences of female research participants (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Clarke & Peel, 2005). Feminist criticism stems from positivism's belief in a universal truth which can be observed, hypothesised, tested and then generalised (Burr, 2003) and because the knowledge positivist research produces is structured in ways that frequently distort or neglect aspects of experience central to women's lives (Stoppard, 2000). An alternative philosophy of knowledge, namely social constructionism, is one that acknowledges the role of human values and particular sociocultural influences in creating and shaping knowledge (Burr, cited in Stoppard, 2000). Feminist researchers seeking an alternative have, therefore, adopted and utilised the social constructionist view of knowledge and meaning to challenge prevailing essentialist knowledge and explore our understanding of women, gender, and sexuality (Kitzinger, 1995; Lafrance, 2006; Stoppard, 2000).

Social construction is a useful framework for feminist research as the two share many key assumptions and goals (Gergen, 2008; Stoppard, 2000). Although there are variations and disagreements among feminist scholars who call themselves social constructionists, one idea gains consensus, that is, the awareness of science as a communal achievement (Gergen & Davis, 1997). While a complete history and review of feminist social construction are beyond the scope of this chapter, the key underlying assumptions and core features of feminist social construction will be discussed.

2.3. Feminist social construction

Social constructionism is a process of intellectual inquiry interested in the way in which people describe, understand and explain their world. It suggests an understanding of the world as historically and culturally situated, a product of people's interactions (Gergen, cited in Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001). Social constructionism is a position which influences and draws its influences from diverse disciplines, including linguistics, sociology and psychology, and is in many ways aligned with the feminist stance (Stoppard, 2000). Rather than being identified by a single defining feature, a social constructionist approach is considered to have one or more of the following assumptions at its foundation (Burr, 2003).

1. Social constructionism challenges the central aims of modernist tradition. It takes an oppositional stance against empiricism and positivism and requires a critical view of the idea that conventional knowledge is based on objective, factual, unbiased observations of the world (Bohan, 2002; Burr, 2003; Stoppard, 2000). An alternative position, compatible with a social constructionist epistemology, is to view all knowledge claims as partial and contingent rather than universal truths removed from the social context in which they are produced (Stoppard, 2000). Because they are produced from a particular perspective, knowledge claims are always partial and conditional. Therefore, meanings which may be deemed significant from a different perspective tend to be perceived as unimportant and, as in the case of childfree lesbian couples, risk being left out.

2. The social constructionist position implies that the concepts and categories we use to make sense of our world and the descriptions we use to describe the nature of reality are respectively products of and dependent upon their associated specific historical and cultural contexts (Burr, 2003; Gergen & Davis, 1997). Subcultures may also have specific concepts and categories which they find useful, but which might not make sense to outsiders. The social constructionist position assists in overcoming the potential disputes that occur when different versions of reality come into conflict. From this position, it is possible to acknowledge the multiplicity of worldviews, and move towards creating conditions wherein the separate groups are able to find opportunities for agreement, tolerance, and compromise (Gergen & Davis, 1997). No assumptions should, therefore, be made that one way of understanding is necessarily closer to the truth, or superior to any other (Burr, 2003). Social constructionists also emphasise that any claims to reality be viewed with scepticism. Unlike positivist claims that facts about the world can be confirmed through observation, the social constructionist position emphasises that our sensory experiences are mediated by the language we choose to describe our experiences (Burr, 2003). We, therefore, cannot claim to have discovered *the* truth, but rather a new interpretation, a different perspective. In this sense, social constructionism encourages creativity and fresh viewpoints (Gergen & Davis, 1997).

3. From a social construction point of view, the currently accepted forms of understanding are constructed during everyday human interaction (Gergen, 2009). This truth is generated from language and is a product of the interactions and social processes in which people are constantly involved with each other, rather than objective observations of the world. Words form our perceptions of the world. As a result of this view, terms of understanding are open to challenge and reconstruction. Feminist social constructionists have challenged how men and women have been described as opposites, while women of colour have

objected to the ways in which white women have claimed to speak for all women, without taking into consideration the differences among women (Gergen & Davis, 1997). In the same way, heterosexual women cannot speak on behalf of lesbians' experiences. Social interactions of all kinds and language, in particular, are then a focus point for social constructionists. Language is not limited only to describing reality, it also shapes and creates reality. It actively produces knowledge and their associated social phenomena and can be considered a form of action (Bohan, 2002; Burr, 2003).

4. Facts are socially constructed. As such, they are always subject to examination for their ethical implications; a view aligned with the political goals of feminism (Gergen & Davis, 1997). Concern regarding the nature of values is central to a feminist social constructionist position, therefore, when scientific explanations are evaluated, we cannot claim that we are merely reporting the facts, without also taking into consideration the values (Gergen & Davis, 1997; Stoppard, 2000).

5. Our shared understandings of the world are dependent on the culture and social norms at a particular time and, therefore, take on different forms, resulting in multiple possible social constructions of the world. Each version also invites or requires a different kind of response. These constructions then sustain particular forms of social action while excluding others, resulting in implications for what is acceptable. Knowledge and social action, therefore, go together (Burr, 2003).

6. Lastly, while traditional psychology seeks explanations for social behaviour by hypothesising the existence of phenomena, social constructionism prefers to focus the enquiry on the interactions and social practices in which people engage. Social constructionism, therefore, moves away from the pathologising, essentialist focus of traditional psychology (Burr, 2003; Stoppard, 2000).

These assumptions of social constructionism are in opposition to most traditional positivist psychology, which increase its appeal and relevance for feminist researchers (Burr, 2003; Stoppard, 2000). As Danziger (1997) highlights, social constructionism's defining characteristic is its criticism of empirical psychology. This critique includes both the questions asked and the methods used by empirical psychology, as well as the answers it has traditionally provided. For some, the central aim is to use social constructionism to undermine damaging or oppressive aspects of positivist psychology (Burr, 2003). Therefore, social constructionism has frequently been adopted by feminist researchers and

others aimed at criticising the positivist empiricism of mainstream psychology (Gergen, 2008; Kitzinger, 1995; Stoppard, 2000) and wishing to challenge oppressive practices.

2.4. Theoretical and methodological issues

There are a few central theoretical assumptions underlying the feminist social constructionist approach that are of particular relevance in the research context, namely subjectivity and reflexivity (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2008; Stoppard, 2000). Within a feminist social constructionist framework objectivity is regarded as impossible, since we experience the world from a particular perspective and the questions we ask arise from the assumptions that are embedded in our perspective. The researcher, therefore, undertakes to acknowledge and work with her own perspective and experiences during the research process and the role that it plays in the research outcomes (Burr, 2003; Stoppard, 2000). The researcher views the research as a co-production between herself and the people she is researching.

Reflexivity is a term widely used by researchers who take a feminist social constructionist perspective (Stoppard, 2000). It refers to the explicit acknowledgement of the personal values and perspectives informing the research so that both researcher and reader can explore how the researcher's personal history and biography might have shaped the research (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2008; Stoppard, 2000). The experiences and social context of the participants will also give a particular context to their accounts, and this must be acknowledged. From a feminist perspective, therefore, a necessary implication of the social constructionist epistemology is that knowledge is likely to be more valid and useful for women when it is produced by women (Stoppard, 2000).

Feminist social constructionists dismiss the idea of grand theories capable of capturing the infinite variety of specific, situated human experiences (Bohan, 2002; Stoppard, 2000) and argue that, since there can never be any objective truth, all claims to have discovered such truths must be considered political acts (Burr, 2003). All claims of truth are seen as attempts to validate some constructs of the world and to invalidate others, and, therefore, to validate some forms of social interactions and to invalidate others. Feminist social constructionists conducting research encourage the democratisation of the research relationship, acknowledging the validity of the participant accounts (Gergen, 2008; Stoppard, 2000).

Feminist researchers have used social construction to challenge pre-existing positivist assumptions of the meaning gender and sexuality (Bohan, 2002; Burr, 2003; Fox & Murry,

2000), motherhood (Arendell, 2000; Maher & Saugeres, 2007), lesbians (Kitzinger, 1995) and voluntary childless women (Allen & Wiles, 2013; Gillespie, 2003; Moore, 2014; Peterson, 2014; Shapiro, 2014), all of which are relevant to this study. A brief overview of these constructs follows.

2.5. Social construction, gender, and sexuality

Social construction advises us to be sceptical of our assumptions about how the world appears to be; the categories we assign do not necessarily refer to real divisions (Burr, 2003). Within a constructionist framework, gender is not an essentialist quality, but rather a construct which embodies cultural meanings of masculinity and femininity, based on interactions that are understood to be appropriate to one sex or another (Bohan, 2002; Fox & Murry, 2000). Gender is defined as an integral element of social structures, interlaced with other elements such as class and race. This perspective specifically points to the processes that differentiate and then assign value and privilege on the basis of sex (Fox & Murry, 2000). Despite the socialisation of gender roles and because gender and self are not one and the same, men and women not only differ in the extent of their masculinity and femininity but also have to be continually prompted to be masculine and feminine. The social constructionist perspective on gender, therefore, suggests that men and women have to 'do' gender rather than 'be' a gender (Fox & Murry, 2000). Essentialist approaches to gender have drawn substantial criticism from both social constructionism and feminist researchers. Two central challenges are of particular relevance. Firstly, gender essentialism implies that all women and their experiences are the same. In addition, when gender is treated, during research, as an individual's "sex" and narrowly defined as characteristic of the individual, other components of gender are not taken into consideration (Stoppard, 2000). Secondly, gender essentialism links women's collective experiences to their simply being women rather than to social arrangements. Critics of the essentialist view contend that not all women experience reality in the same way, and argue that no prevailing archetype exists (Bohan, 2002). Instead, women's experiences are highly diversified and are influenced by and dependent upon their personal, socio-cultural, historical and political circumstances.

Sexuality would seem to be anything but socially constructed. The assumption that sexuality is simply part of human nature is supported by mainstream biological and evolutionary theories. These theories form the basis of our ideas about men and women's natural inclinations. But what is seen as natural is also seen as normal, that is, characteristic of the accepted behaviour of a specific group of people (Burr, 2003).

However, the use of the terms natural and normal has developed moral significance where people feel that their sexual behaviour should be natural and normal, and this means heterosexual sex. Therefore, anyone perceived to be outside of the accepted mainstream sexuality would have to be pathologised. However, when sexuality is seen as socially constructed, driven by meaning, and not biology, we avoid this problem. Meaning itself is socially created and shared, and the idea of sexual orientation - the notion of defining an individual's identity in relation to the sex of a romantic partner - is an understanding located within a particular historical and cultural context (Bohan, 2002). From this social constructionist viewpoint, one way of understanding women who choose lesbian relationships - because they see heterosexuality as politically oppressive - is to recognise what heterosexuality means to them (Burr, 2003; Kitzinger, 1995). Moreover, it can be further understood if we locate that meaning within a feminist perspective that is predominant in their particular social context. Sexuality is a moral issue because the meaning that sexuality carries for us cannot be separated from the cultural, economic and social, structures of the society in which we live. Sexual practices are pertinent to such central issues as who produces and raises children, and how families are constructed (Burr, 2003). The value of social constructionism lies in its ability to challenge existing constructs and consider how they could be constructed differently.

2.6. Social construction and lesbians

The debates over who and what makes a lesbian, and the degree to which a lesbian identity is fixed or flexible, can be found throughout literature, psychology and philosophy. The concept of a lesbian label and identity is a relatively new one and is both culturally and temporally determined. Due to widely differing definitions of sexuality - especially in contexts which do not accept Western, Eurocentric cultural constructs of sexuality or recognise particular sexual orientations – women's lesbian behaviour may occur cross-culturally, but a defined lesbian identity may not exist in these contexts. Kitzinger and others (Brown, 1995) have written extensively to show how lesbians have been historically, politically and socially constructed in various differing ways. For example, originating in Britain, there is Kitzinger's (1987) radical feminist analysis, where she argues that lesbians do not simply exist, but rather are constructed within societies established via the male subordination of women. While in South Africa, and much of the rest of Africa, constructions of homosexuality as "unAfrican" and "unGodly" have been used to justify heterosexist practices and policies (Gibson & Macleod, 2012; Vincent & Howell, 2014). These constructions are in opposition to essentialists, who apply categories of sexual orientation to individuals, and think that there are objective, innate certainties regarding a person's

sexual orientation. Social constructionists refute the existence of these certainties and agree that it is erroneous to define a person as being of a specific sexual orientation, without taking into account the cultural construction of their orientation (Kitzinger, 1995).

In conclusion, an essential feature of social constructionist theory is the assumption that women have no intrinsic sexual nature to which labels of sexual orientation can easily be applied, and that sexual orientation cannot transcend time and cultures but is rather historically and socially situated (Kitzinger, 1995).

2.7. Social construction and motherhood

Motherhood is enmeshed with ideas of femininity (Chodorow, cited in Arendell, 2000), and mothering reinforces women's gender identity. Motherhood and womanhood are considered as corresponding identities and categories of experience. However, not all women are mothers, and the work of raising and caring for children is not inevitably the exclusive domain of women (Arendell, 2000).

Social constructionism provides a particularly strong framework for considering mothering and motherhood (Arendell, 2000). From this perspective, the view of motherhood as a natural and normal development for all women is rejected (Burr, 2003; Mamabolo, Langa, & Kiguwa, 2006). Gillespie (2000) argues that part of the hegemonic pronatalism is a dominant motherhood discourse which, in Western culture, has come to be understood as an inherent, natural, fulfilling practice which is central to feminine identity. Feminist social constructionism, however, views motherhood and mothering as "dynamic social interactions and relationships, located in a historical, societal context organised by gender and in accord with the prevailing gender belief system" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1193). Women are socialised, by prevailing discourses produced through psychological, medical, social, political and religious institutions, to believe that only through motherhood can women be truly fulfilled, and gain purpose and meaning in their lives (Burr, 2003; Gillespie, 2000; Gotlib, 2016). According to a social constructionist perspective, motherhood is seen from a viewpoint of these varying discourses (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001). Dominant constructions of motherhood situated within society are recognised by women who use them as standards against which to understand, measure and evaluate their own experiences and to construct their own ideas (Woollett & Phoenix, cited in Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001).

Within feminist constructionist attempts to describe the diversity of mothering is an examination of motherhood ideology (Arendell, 2000). The dominant ideology in the United States is that of intensive mothering, which asserts that mothering is wholly child-centred, emotionally engaging, and time-consuming (Hays, 1996). Motherhood ideology is entangled with idealised beliefs of the self-sufficient, nuclear family, in the image of a heterosexual, middle-class, white couple with children. Intensive mothering ideology both assumes and reinforces the traditional gender-based division of labour (Arendell, 2000). This intensive mothering ideology remains, despite cultural discrepancies and varied arrangements and applications, "the normative standard, culturally and politically, by which mothering practices and arrangements are evaluated" (Arendell, 2000, p. 1195) in the context of North America and many West-European and developed nations.

However, a variety of deviancy discourses depart from this ideological construct of mothering. These discourses are aimed at mothers who do not conform to the norm of a heterosexual, married, full-time mother. Welfare mothers, single mothers, non-white mothers and lesbian mothers are subjected to deviancy discourses of mothering (Arendell, 2000). Married white, employed mothers, especially if they are middle-class, are also subjects of deviancy discourses due to their working status (Arendell, 2000). Women who make use of assisted reproductive technologies are also possible subjects of motherhood deviancy discourses, as they are seen to be interfering with the natural process of reproduction (Arendell, 2000). To the extent that prevailing discourses are often tied to social practices which support and maintain the status of powerful groups, then those who challenge these dominant discourses also implicitly challenge the associated social practices, structures and power relations (Burr, 2003).

Many of the ideas contained within dominant constructions of motherhood have been heavily criticised (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001). Firstly, parenting advice has been based on white middle-class mothers with non-disabled children. Secondly, the context in which mothers from minority groups have to construct their understanding of motherhood were seldom discussed in the literature. Thirdly, feminist researchers pointed out that mothers from different social circumstances experience and therefore may understand motherhood differently. Fourthly, most constructs of motherhood relate to the mothering of small children, which results in a lack of understanding of the mothering of older children.

2.8. Social construction and voluntary childfree women

The pervasive political and social climate of pronatalism and emphasis on 'family' values often prevents voluntary childlessness from emerging as an alternative cultural discourse and practice (Carey, Graham, Shelley, & Taket, 2009). Due to prevailing motherhood discourses, voluntarily childfree women challenge dominant perceptions of female identity and femininity. In feminist literature, womanhood and femininity are so strongly associated with motherhood and maternity that the meanings associated with childfree women are often constructed in opposition to constructions of motherhood. Motherhood is associated with mature adulthood, implying that women who reject motherhood have not reached full maturity and are viewed as infantile, immature and childlike (Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Letherby & Williams, 1999). Simultaneously, voluntarily childless women have been constructed as morally deviant (Letherby, 2002; Park, 2002) as their lack of desire to mother contravenes constructions of femininity, nurturing and self-sacrifice, associated with motherhood (Carey et al., 2009). Park (2002) and Letherby (2002) argue that the stigma and negative perceptions of the voluntarily childless are derived from social contexts that continue to be strongly pronatalist. Motherhood and non-motherhood are carried out in both private and public spheres. Dominant discourses, therefore, profoundly affect women's experiences in both a public and private sense, affecting their social interactions and experiences, but also their individual attitudes, experiences and emotional responses (Carey et al., 2009).

According to the essentialist view, women have a natural, universal instinct to reproduce, which childless women, therefore, lack. This suggests that women who are not mothers are not 'real' women (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). Feminist approaches to childless women accept that 'women' are socially constructed, but also insist that, before socialisation, there is a body, which would seem to direct socialisation in distinct directions. Which is why, when women's identity is located in their ability to procreate, childless women are frequently represented as unnatural deviants (Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Moore, 2014). By committing to their careers and rejecting motherhood as a less important contribution to society, childless women are often constructed as unfeminine, wanting to be more like men. Women who do not aspire to motherhood are considered to suffer from a psychopathology, which has been explained as the consequence of either childhood trauma, inadequate and repressive parenting or negative identification with maternal figures (Reading & Amatea, cited in Hird & Abshoff, 2000). Women without children are still outsiders in pronatalist societies, resulting in the ongoing negative stereotyping of voluntarily childless women as selfish and

deviant, and their portrayal as aberrant, immature, and unfeminine (Basten, 2009; Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Mamabolo et al., 2006).

Voluntarily childless women do not constitute a homogeneous group, and Hird and Abshoff (2000) argue that some reasons given for remaining childfree can be seen as positive, an alternative to the 'unnatural' construct. Reasons stated include freedom, independence, prioritisation of intimate relationships, career and financial considerations, humanitarian concerns, a dislike of children, early socialisation experiences and apprehension regarding the physical aspects of pregnancy and childbirth (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). Childfree adults have also constructed parenthood as a less than ideal option for all, thereby framing childlessness as a positive alternative to lessen the stigma toward people who choose not to have children (Moore, 2014). By promoting reproductive consciousness for everyone, childlessness is repositioned as a positive force for children and society (Moore, 2014). Repositioning childfree adults in a more positive light simultaneously challenges dominant understandings of gender and reproduction.

2.9. Conclusion

Knowledge is achieved through paying attention to the different, unique aspects of women's experiences. Lesbians should therefore not be subsumed into the dominant heterosexual culture but should rather seek to enhance understanding by making their voices heard (Auchmuty, Jeffreys, & Miller, 1992). Conducting research with female same-sex couples in South Africa provides a unique historical, social and cultural context wherein lesbian couples receive constitutional and legal protection from discrimination, and support for marriage and child-rearing, however, this is juxtaposed against a homophobic and patriarchal social system. In this context, feminist social constructionism - with its emphasis on understanding women's lives from their perspectives and examining how behaviour and language create meaning in social context - provides a powerful framework for exploring how women make sense of their lives.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

Before we can ask why some lesbian couples are choosing not to have children together, it is important to consider that, up until a few decades ago, the question would have been irrelevant. Historically, lesbians (or rather those lesbians who disclosed their sexual orientation) were not considered fit to parent, and the idea of lesbian motherhood was contradictory, or simply deemed impossible. It was only when research into lesbian couples and then lesbian planned families showed that lesbians are, in fact, not only fit to parent but in some ways even superior parents, that the assumed convergence of womanhood and motherhood previously reserved for heterosexual women became applicable to lesbians. While research into the trend of childfree heterosexual couples is growing and provides insight into those couples choosing not to have children, it should not be presumed that lesbian couples' experiences are comparable, due to their inability to have a biological child together and the heteronormative contexts in which their relationships are situated. As a result of these fundamental differences in the way heterosexual and lesbian women have been both historically and currently linked to motherhood, this chapter will focus on the following areas of literature to situate the current study within the existing research. Firstly, I will outline what research into lesbian intimate relationships has revealed, as this dyad is the unit of research in this study. Secondly, I will review the literature on the feminist social construction of motherhood for all women, and then more specifically for lesbian motherhood, providing a backdrop against which childfreedom is foregrounded. Thirdly, I review the literature on lesbian planned families and their children; and finally, I focus on the findings and limitations of research into voluntary childlessness as a phenomenon of both heterosexual and lesbian couples. These are broad areas of research, and a review of all available literature is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, the focus will be predominantly on qualitative, feminist social constructionist research, in line with the theoretical framework adopted for this study. Since available research on lesbians, their relationships and childfree women is limited in South Africa, I have relied predominantly on international studies, with the addition of local research where available.

3.2. Lesbian intimate relationships

Intimate relationships are strongly desired and highly regarded by most individuals, and, once established, the relationship becomes a defining aspect of their lives (Umberson, Thomeer, Kroeger, Lodge, & Xu, 2015). Lesbians, like heterosexuals, are socialised to appreciate love, relationships, marriage, and "living happily ever after" (Rothblum, 2009), and research on same-sex relationships has advanced rapidly over recent decades (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Kurdek, 2004b, 2005; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Patterson, 2000). The family lives of lesbians have historically been a subject of controversy. Due to the stigma attached to non-heterosexual identities, those who claim a lesbian identity often do so at the risk of family relationships. In most countries the law does not recognise same-sex marriage, nor does it protect relationships between lesbian parents and their children. Despite such obstacles, however, lesbians often succeed in creating and sustaining meaningful family relationships (Patterson, 2000). Same-sex researchers have compared lesbian couples across many of the same interrelated areas that have been researched with heterosexual couples. These include relationship satisfaction, sexual behaviour, division of labour, conflict, stability, commitment (Kurdek, 2004b, 2005; Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2002; Patterson, 2000; Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson, 2009; Rothblum, 2009), the role of children, perceived social support, and relationship quality, violence and terminations (Markey, Markey, Nave, & August, 2014; Patterson, 2000; Rothblum, 2009; Totenhagen, Butler, & Ridley, 2012). Findings from research comparing lesbian and heterosexual couples indicate that lesbian couples tend to be more comparable to than contrasting with, heterosexual couples, across a wide range of variables (Markey & Markey, 2013). For example, lesbian couples share the broader relationship experiences of heterosexual women, including the importance of commitment and shared values on relationship issues (Matthews et al., 2002; Patterson, 2000). Kurdek (2004a, 2005) documented that the predictors of satisfaction, commitment, and stability are generally the same for lesbian and heterosexual partners, while his 2008 study provided additional evidence that the processes that regulate lesbian relationships are the same as those that regulate the relationships of heterosexual partners (Kurdek, 2008). In Italy, a study comparing heterosexual and same-sex couples found overall similarities across multiple areas of relationship functioning (Antonelli, Dettore, Lasagni, Snyder, & Balderrama-Durbin, 2014). Much like heterosexual couples, lesbian couples often succeed in creating and sustaining successful, meaningful, committed relationships.

There are, however, some significant differences between lesbian and heterosexual couples which should be taken into consideration when exploring their childfree status. For

example, lesbian couples show greater equality and gender-role flexibility than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2005; Matthews et al., 2002; Rothblum, 2009), as well as superior handling of conflict (Kurdek, 2005). In Kurdek's (2004a) study, lesbian couples were found to function better than heterosexual partners, but their same-sex relationships received less support from, and contact with their family members, than heterosexual couples received (Kurdek, 2004b; Rothblum, 2009). However, factors affecting these findings include those unique to particular studies, such as Kurdek (2004a) comparing lesbian couples without children to heterosexual couples with children, and those factors affecting lesbian couples on a broader level, such as the fact that lesbian couples operate within a social context which differs from that of heterosexual couples (Meyer, 2003). Same-sex relationships were found not to last as long as married heterosexuals (Rothblum, 2009), possibly as a result of a historical absence of legal marriage, a lower probability of parenthood, greater autonomy, or less stigma attached to being single than among heterosexuals. In addition, lesbian relationships dissolution occurs sooner than heterosexual relationships because there is less social support from families and society in general for same-sex couples to be together and less social resistance to breaking up (Rothblum, 2009).

Research looking only at lesbian couples - without comparison to heterosexual couples - has examined various aspects of their relationships including behavioural styles, interpersonal relationship quality, communication processes, long-term intimacy, resilience and relationship longevity (Connolly, 2004, 2006; Connolly & Sicola, 2005; Markey & Markey, 2013; Markey et al., 2014; Riggle, Rothblum, Rostosky, Clark, & Balsam, 2016; Totenhagen et al., 2012). The majority of studies find that the factors contributing to relationship quality for lesbian couples do not differ broadly from those of heterosexual married couples. In South Africa, research into intimate lesbian relationships is scarce. While research into homosexuality is growing, it has focused predominantly at an individual level or on lesbian motherhood. The few studies available have explored the impact of race and social location on lesbian couples' sense of belonging, lesbian discourses around what it means to be black and lesbian, lesbians' narratives of sexuality and identity construction, stressors as potential sources of conflict for lesbian couples, and the ways in which South African lesbians appropriate heteronormativity in describing their intimate relationships and identity (Gibson & Macleod, 2012; Ochse, 2009, 2011; Potgieter, 2003; van Zyl, 2011). These studies focused more on the ways in which lesbians respond to and challenge the intersections of race, class, sexual identity and heteronormativity within the external South African context, and less on the internal dynamics of their relationships. Despite external differences in how heterosexual and lesbian couples are established, the relationships of

lesbian couples appear to work in much the same way as the relationships of heterosexual couples do, despite the fact that, for the most part, they enter into romantic relationships within a social context which is often sexist, heterosexist, and homophobic (Connolly & Sicola, 2005). Diamond (2006) highlights the importance of remaining aware and critical of the cultural assumptions that often underlie same-sex research questions. Researchers' emphasis on confirming that lesbian couples aspire to similar long-term relationships as heterosexuals can potentially prevent us from asking important questions about alternative preferences and unexpected relationships that might challenge existing assumptions about intimate lesbian relationships (Diamond, 2006). As interest in sexual orientation and family life grows, the work to understand family formation among same-sex couples becomes increasingly necessary (Riskind et al., 2013). While lesbian couples do share many similarities with heterosexual couples, they also negotiate areas with unique issues, such as motherhood and children.

3.3. Motherhood

Motherhood has traditionally been framed as an experience integral to a woman's identity and central to gendered expectations for women (Hird, 2003; Mcquillan et al., 2008). However, in the 1960s, feminists began raising concerns regarding women's subordinate role as a result of their being mothers and offered conflicting ideas of motherhood. By the 1970s, feminists had successfully expanded the term 'woman' to include a multitude of possible identities, none of which positioned motherhood at the centre (Morell, 2000). Motherhood theories, such as those of Adrienne Rich (1986) and Nancy Chodorow (1978), associated the subordination of women in society to the gendered demarcation of labour which placed responsibility for all childcare with mothers. Subsequent to the emergence of these theories, many women questioned society's assumption that motherhood is 'natural and inevitable' and concluded that being a mother should not necessarily be a woman's highest sense of accomplishment. Feminist scholars began exploring and questioning the so-called inherent desire to be a mother while simultaneously demonstrating how gender identity beliefs result in the merging of motherhood and womanhood (Ireland, 1993). During this second-wave of feminism, scholars began describing not only the fascination and joy of mothering, but also the pain, isolation, and boredom. The 'woman equals mother' equation was briefly severed, and some feminists considered motherhood as simply a single aspect of a woman's identity rather than critical to her sense of self (Ireland, 1993). However, as highlighted by Snitow (1992), these second-wave feminist scholars, who were focused on reproductive freedom, were more adept at paying attention to the voices of mothers, than they were capable of conceiving a complete and meaningful childfree life.

As Adrienne Rich (1986) argues, ideologies of reproduction describe 'woman' in terms of 'mother' in ways which classify the lives of all women – into those who are mothers and those who are not (Woollett & Boyle, 2000). The socially constructed meaning of motherhood is highlighted by Hays (1996), who declared that it is the "ideas and practices attached to childbirth and child rearing that constitute the culture of socially appropriate mothering" (p. 14). Motherhood as a social construction rejects the assumption that the practices and meanings of motherhood are in any way natural instinct, biological, essential or inevitable (Burr, 2003). Rather, it implies that the ways of perceiving and experiencing motherhood in society are the result of processes of social construction, constantly being re-made by members of society. This happens, for example, through everyday interactions, discourses, and social practice (O'Reilly, 2010). Motherhood is constructed of multiple varying strands of discourse in a dynamic process, embedded within specific contexts, influenced by the prevailing social, political, cultural and economic norms of the time (Arendell, 2000; Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001). As Snitow (1992, p. 39) put forward, the question asked by feminist writers attempting to "pry mothering away from the patriarchal institution, motherhood" in the 1970's, but rarely addressed, was: "which construction of motherhood is productive for feminist work?" Motherhood has been distinguished by several dominant constructions which are viewed as "existing within the wider society and are recognised by individual women who use them as standards against which to evaluate their own experiences and construct their own ideas" (Phoenix, Woollett, & Lloyd, 1991, p. 42).

The construction of motherhood and a desire for children as natural instinct and unquestioned, insuppressible biological drive (Garwood, 2014; Glenn, 1994; Miller, 2007; Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000; Woollett & Marshall, 2001), or as the result of strong societal pressure (Maher & Saugeres, 2007; Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000) has been criticised for positioning women passively and concealing women's agency in the decision to have children. However, when constructed by others as the outcome of decision-making (Maher & Saugeres, 2007; Malacrida & Boulton, 2012; Sevón, 2005), motherhood highlights women's agency in reproduction. Social psychological theories consider the social constructions of motherhood and the function motherhood serves for society. They argue that the desire and ability to be a mother is not so much a woman's innate tendency; but rather a learned social role, whereby girls are socialised to understand motherhood as a normal, integral part of being a suitably feminine woman (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Gillespie, 2000; Kelly, 2010; O'Reilly, 2010; Shapiro, 2014). The result is that women expect and want to look after children. From a psychological perspective, mothering in a

patriarchal society can have negative psychological and social implications for women. For example, due to the simultaneous idealisation of motherhood and the low status given to the care of children in a patriarchal society, mothers are vulnerable to mother blame for any negative child-related outcomes in life (Jackson & Mannix, 2004), or for not living up to the expectations of their 'natural' instincts and internalised ideals (Garwood, 2014; Pope, Quinne & Wyer, cited in Kruger, 2003; Miller, 2007; Steinberg, 2005). Furthermore, to avoid blame and feelings of guilt and failure, mothers feel pressured to devote vast amounts of time and energy to motherhood (Hays, 1996), leading to their further subordination in society (Arendell, 2000).

Over the past two decades, international researchers have focused on various facets of motherhood construction processes. For example, Símonardóttir (2016), looked at the construction of the mother within the discourse of attachment in Iceland and found that certain 'truths' became scientifically sanctioned while conflicting discourses were construed as inappropriate or even unnatural. In the United Kingdom, Garwood (2014) highlighted the ways in which motherhood has become an unquestioned, naturalised, stable identity within contemporary society; Hadfield, Rudoe and Sanderson-Mann (2007) asked how motherhood, in relation to choice, age and fertility, was being represented in the British media and discovered that media has not moved away from cultural discourses associated with femininity and motherhood; and Wall (2001) highlighted moral constructions of motherhood in breastfeeding discourses, which showed that the needs of mothers become obscured, while their mothering behaviour becomes subject to public scrutiny. Within the South African context, for example, Kruger and Lourens (2016) explored low-income, depressed mother's experiences of emotional distress, highlighting how the reprimands of hungry children can induce a cycle of guilt and shame in their mothers; Mamabolo, Langa and Kiguwa (2006) explored female university students' perceptions of motherhood and found many female students to be ambivalent about motherhood, with conflicting preferences for being career mothers weighed against establishing a career first, set against the sentiment of motherhood as natural and required. Macleod (2001) analysed the construction and regulation of mothering in teenage pregnancy literature and illustrated how the reproduction of normative understandings and regulation of mothering were reflected in the South African psycho-medical literature; and Kruger (2003) analysed the narratives of two mothers to understand how their personal stories could potentially subvert motherhood myths, and discovered that they reverted to reflecting and reproducing dominant motherhood ideologies. These contributions to the social construction of motherhood challenge the assumption that there are any given characteristics of motherhood. They deconstruct assumed social and cultural connotations of motherhood,

for example, that biology determines the way that motherhood is experienced, or that there is a universal maternal instinct. Instead of taking assumptions like these for granted, research into the social construction of motherhood tries to illustrate how dominant meanings of motherhood have developed, evolved, and are constantly being (re)produced by members of society (O'Reilly, 2010). Psychological research on motherhood extends across opposing views, with some feminist researchers criticising it as a patriarchal construct, emphasising the oppressive role of motherhood in women's lives (Ichou, 2006), while others highlight and affirm the idealisation of the practice of motherhood through a discourse of 'women-as-different' (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, cited in Mamabolo et al., 2006). While research into motherhood has expanded and diversified over recent years, the dominant ideology of intensive mothering remains the normative standard against which mothering practices are evaluated (Arendell, 2000).

However, as several articles explore (Arendell, 2000; Clarke, 2008; Garwood, 2014; Woollett & Boyle, 2000), a variety of deviancy discourses depart from this ideological construct of mothering. These discourses target mothers who do not conform to the norm of a full-time mother in the context of heterosexual marriage. Single mothers, welfare mothers, white married mothers who are employed and lesbian mothers are subjected to these deviancy discourses. Some routes to motherhood, such as surrogacy, and donor insemination for lesbians, are also potentially subjects of motherhood deviancy discourses, as they are seen to be intruding into the natural process of reproduction (Arendell, 2000; Woollett & Marshall, 2001). They raise moral and practical questions for women and the wider society about what it means to be a mother, the acceptability of some pathways to motherhood, and who is considered 'appropriate' to be a mother. Psychological accounts tend to be written in terms of 'the mother,' on the assumption that the singular term can speak for all mothers. However, women's narratives strongly indicate that their experiences are mediated by the particular circumstances of their lives and the contexts in which they mother. These contexts include their relationships and sexual orientation (Woollett & Marshall, 2001). The following section considers lesbian mothers, and the space they occupy in the psychological literature.

3.4. The social construction of lesbian mothers

As stated by Parks (1998), lesbian parenting is not a new occurrence. While lesbian mothers have, historically, remained hidden to many in prevailing culture, it is not the existence of lesbian mothers that has changed, but rather the public awareness of them (Kelly, 2010). Research on heterosexual mothers has long been the norm, yet it is only in

the last few decades that lesbian mothers have moved into focus. In the 1960s, social and technological advancements began to facilitate motherhood for lesbians (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006). Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, the term 'lesbian mother' first appeared within the feminist psychological literature but was seen as contradictory, in opposition to heteronormative heterosexuality. In the 1990s, the number of lesbians becoming mothers increased rapidly, through donor insemination, adoption, fostering, and a variety of co-parenting arrangements (Clarke, 2008). While motherhood and lesbianism are no longer incongruent, lesbian mothers are still often required to mediate an identity bounded by their marginalised lesbianism on one side and their revered role as a mother on the other (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999).

While the majority of research has focused on highlighting 'proof' of lesbian mothers equality with that of their heterosexual counterparts, more recently scholars have examined the social construction of lesbian motherhood in the psychological literature, acknowledging that scientific evidence remains open to multiple interpretations that ultimately relate to moral or political agendas (Clarke, 2000). In a historical review of the social construction of lesbian mothers from 1886-2006, Clarke (2008) examined the evolving history of the lesbian mother. In her analysis, she identifies five constructions of lesbian mothers through time. From the initial phases of the masculine and immature lesbian, through the affirmative 'fit lesbian parent' of the 1970's, to the good or bad lesbian parent of the 1980's custody hearings, to the most recent 'new lesbian', reinventing the family (Clarke, 2000). This development of the social construction of lesbian motherhood from outsider to reinvention is a theme running through much of the psychological literature. Clarke's earlier phases drew on the work of Calhoun (2000) who argued that the early construction of lesbians was primarily that of being an outsider to family and unfit for motherhood. In her book Calhoun (2000) describes how lesbian feminists critiqued the lesbian baby boom, arguing that resisting motherhood was important for political reasons as being a mother "disables lesbians from publicly occupying the identity 'lesbian'." (p. 136). As a result of the incongruence between lesbianism and motherhood at the time, lesbian mothers were automatically assumed to be heterosexual, thereby facilitating the obscuring of lesbian identity. The removal of homosexuality from the DSM-II in 1973 marked the beginning of an affirmative lesbian psychology in the United States, which in turn spread to the United Kingdom and beyond (Kitzinger, 1987). Custody cases brought the focus on lesbian mothers to the attention of the legal fraternity, who subsequently turned to the mental health profession for research. The 1970's and 1980's saw the emergence of the lesbian mother as a category, although it still was not clear whether they were 'different from' or 'just the same as' heterosexual mothers (Clarke, 2002; Golombok, 2007).

Attempts to prove lesbian mothers as no different from heterosexual mothers also meant that lesbian motherhood remained, fundamentally, a contradiction in terms. Studies compared lesbian mothers against the qualities and outcomes of heterosexual mothers (Bos, van Balen, & van Den Boom, 2004; Clarke, 2002; Golombok, 2007) resulting in two opposing constructs of the lesbian mother: the 'just-as-good-as lesbian mother' and the 'bad lesbian mother' (Clarke, 2008). Since the 1990's, when greater numbers of lesbians started choosing to have children, the previous image of the single lesbian mother has gradually been replaced by two-mother lesbian families. This resulted in the advent of the 'other mother' in the literature (Clarke, 2008), referred to variously as a 'co-mother' (Golombok, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1998), 'non-biological mother' (Patterson, 1995; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009), and 'social mother' (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2005; Van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017; Zamperini, Testoni, Primo, & Prandelli, 2016). By 2000, the narratives of the 'just-as-good-as lesbian mother' became associated with and eventually superseded by narratives of the 'better-than' lesbian family (Clarke, 2008), wherein lesbians were now considered potentially superior parents (Esterberg, 2008; Patterson, 2004; Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown, & Kane, 2007). Lesbian mothers were now constructed as suitable to parent and of benefit to children (Clarke, 2008), although mothers are still assumed to be heterosexual unless otherwise stated, and lesbian motherhood continues to be regarded as a departure from the norm, even in affirmative contexts.

3.5. Lesbian mothers: South African research

While South African research into lesbian motherhood is limited (Lubbe, 2007), there is a small and growing body of research exploring lesbian mothers' lives, personal experiences, reproductive decision-making and families, including published work (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer, 2016; Distiller, 2011; Lubbe, 2008; Potgieter, 2003; Van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017), as well as unpublished research (Ordman, 2016; Suckling, 2010; Swain, 2010). Focusing on lesbian mothers' personal accounts, researchers found relatively positive portrayals of motherhood, which were attributed, in part, to the fact that despite legal and purported social acceptance of motherhood, lesbian mothers felt that they had to work extra hard to prove their capabilities as parents (Suckling, 2010; Van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017). Notwithstanding the positive portrayals, Suckling (2010) highlighted that lesbian parenting is a particularly challenging experience due to the societal judgement and lack of support they experience. The white, middle-class lesbian participants in Breshears and Lubbe-De Beer's (2016) research reported mostly positive perceptions of attitudes toward their

families while acknowledging their experiences may not be shared by all sexual minorities. In another same-sex parent study, Lubbe (2008) used a narrative approach to explore the experiences of children growing up with lesbian mothers. Her findings revealed that children are aware and accepting of the tendency for people to respond in diverse ways to lesbian couples raising children. This awareness equipped them with a heightened sensitivity and open-mindedness that characterised their social interactions. In Ordman's (2016) research exploring how lesbians' construct their reproductive decision-making, lesbian mothers viewed their identity and role as a parent as no different to those of heterosexual parents, as they share the same concerns regarding their children's well-being. Potgieter (2003) analysed lesbian discourses on motherhood and gender roles. While not mother's themselves, participants displayed a vested interest in portraying themselves as everyday women and framed their motherhood discourses predominantly within a discourse of the normal, regular women. They conformed to the dominant cultural discourse of biological mothering, but within this discourse simultaneously challenged the role of men. Aside from Potgieter's research (2003), the majority of the South African qualitative body of research focuses on white, urban, middle-class lesbians, making generalisations to all South African lesbian mothers impossible. An additional limitation is the small sample used in some studies; at times only an individual mother (Distiller, 2011) or single couple (Suckling, 2010). However, despite the limitations of existing research, it would seem that lesbian couples are creating their families in a variety of ways, whilst navigating between conforming to and challenging existing constructs of motherhood.

3.6. Pathways to lesbian motherhood

Previously the most common route to motherhood for lesbians was one in which children were born as a result of heterosexual relationships before the mother took on a lesbian identity (Telingator & Patterson, 2008). However, the increase in social and political acceptance of lesbian relationships over the past few decades has produced additional means for lesbian couples to have children via surrogacy, donor insemination, and adoption (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). Each of these opportunities requires that the couple takes into consideration various practical, legal, ethical, and emotional issues. These issues produce questions which develop from the couple's themselves, their status within their gay and straight communities, and from the couples' families (Parks, 1998). Although assisted reproductive technology allows for biological motherhood, without the need for an opposite-sex partner, these alternative options are costly. Where adoption by lesbian couples is not specifically banned or illegal prohibited, lesbians are required to overcome barriers to adoption including discrimination, a protracted process and high costs (Brewster,

Tillman, & Jokinen-Gordon, 2014). Race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status are also significant mediating factors in the relationship between sexual identity and motherhood. Despite the media depiction of lesbian parents as mostly white, highly-educated and middle-class, the probability of motherhood for white lesbians is lower than for any other group (Brewster et al., 2014). I could not locate any data on lesbian motherhood in South African, but looking at overseas trends, a United States longitudinal study of lesbian and gay youth, ages 15-19, showed that 91% of young urban lesbian women expected to have children at some point (D'Augelli, Rendina, Sinclair, & Grossman, 2008). However, in another United States nationally representative survey, fewer than 18% of lesbians are actually having children (Brewster et al., 2014). Yet there is little research to assist in our understanding of why lesbian couples are choosing not to have children.

Since 2000, when The Netherlands expanded marital rights to lesbian couples, there has been a significant extension of legal recognitions provided to lesbian couples. To date, same-sex marriage has been legalised in over twenty countries, including Argentina, Uruguay, all Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, Mexico, the United States and Canada, Ireland, the United Kingdom, and South Africa - the only country in Africa to recognise marriage equality to date. Additional countries have granted lesbian couples rights via civil unions and domestic partnerships, with some also allowing adoption by lesbian couples (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). Some countries, including South Africa, allow lesbian couples access to assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as donor in vitro fertilisation (IVF) and artificial insemination (AI). This access to fertility procedures is of ground-breaking importance to lesbians who would like to become mothers, while legal protection helps to enable the journey to parenthood both practically and emotionally (Rozental & Malmquist, 2015). As same-sex families pursued increased recognition, legislative scrutiny motivated scholars to research these families (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013).

3.7. Lesbian planned families

Research on lesbian families began about 40 years ago and proceeded in two phases. Initially, studies of lesbian families examined lesbians who had become parents while in heterosexual relationships (Johnson, 2012). Studies in this first phase were used to support lesbian parents in custody cases (Bos et al., 2005). The objective was to determine whether lesbian-headed families put children at risk for developing psychological or social problems. Therefore, the emphasis was on the many ways in which lesbian-headed families functioned similarly to heterosexual families (Johnson, 2012). In the second phase, the weight of research shifted from unplanned/post-divorce lesbian stepfamilies to planned

lesbian families (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). This research was used to support lesbians who were fighting for equal rights to adopt children or for access to reproductive technologies (Bos et al., 2005). Research currently underway focuses less on comparing lesbian families with heterosexual ones and instead places greater emphasis on the unique dynamics and characteristics of lesbian families themselves (Johnson, 2012).

Research into lesbian planned parenting has examined their desires, motivations, intentions, their self-efficacy about achieving parenthood, their decision-making and both youth and adult's aspirations for raising children (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2003; D'Augelli et al., 2008; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind et al., 2013; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). Overall, lesbians were optimistic about their possibility of achieving motherhood if they wanted to. Younger participants who lived in social contexts favourable to same-sex couples, and who reported that the children of lesbian mothers experience favourable outcomes, reported the highest self-efficacy about achieving parenthood. However, lesbians were found to be far less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to become parents, and psychological determinants may be partly responsible for this difference (Riskind et al., 2013). More than half of lesbian youth aspired to raise their own biological children (D'Augelli et al., 2008), and adult lesbians who intended to become parents were no less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to do so. Compared with heterosexual parents, lesbian parents spent more time considering their motives for having children and their desire to have a child was stronger; however fewer lesbian than heterosexual adults express desires for parenthood (Bos et al., 2003). Therefore, results of research in this area suggest that, while those lesbians intending to become parents are able to do so, fewer have the desire to become mothers in the first place. Finally, Rowlands and Lee (2006), in their study on the attitudes of others towards lesbians' parental decision-making, found that lesbian woman intending to have children were rated as happier, more mature and more individualistic than those not intending to have children, suggesting that social attitudes towards female sexual orientation and women's mothering decisions are changing.

3.8. Children raised by lesbian couples

The outcomes for children raised by lesbian parents compared to those of children raised by heterosexual parents have received considerable attention at an international level, and particular areas of concern have directed much of this research on children with lesbian parents. These concerns involve the development of sexual identity, sexual orientation, children's personal, behavioural and emotional development, cognitive functioning and the concern that children of lesbian parents may experience challenges in social relationships

within the family, with other adults, or their peers (Bos et al., 2005; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). None of these concerns are supported by the results of empirical research, and no evidence has been reported to indicate difficulties with children of lesbian parents, or to reveal any significant differences between children of lesbian versus heterosexual mothers (Bos et al., 2005; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Children do not appear to have emotional problems or react negatively when they become aware of their mothers' sexual orientation (Bos et al., 2005). Fears of children of lesbians being sexually abused by adults or ostracised by peers have also received no support from existing research outcomes (Diamond, 2006).

Psychologists and scholars have looked at lesbian parents' division of labour, co-parenting styles, family structure and child care (Farr & Patterson, 2013), as well as how they negotiate social institutions relevant to parents, such as academic, child care, and playground settings (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). The research reports that lesbian mothers and their children are healthy, secure, and efficient at navigating the multiple challenges associated with their stigmatised and minority status (Parks, 1998). They successfully create nurturing families in which they are raising well-adjusted, successful and open-minded children who do as well as or better than those raised by heterosexual parents (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). There is, therefore, no support in the literature for concern that lesbians cannot be successful parents.

3.9. Lesbian motherhood as access to heteronormative status

As outlined in Chapter One's definitions of key concepts, 1.5.3, this study adopts Oswald, Blume and Marks (2005) definition, which defines heteronormativity as a social construct, built on the belief that heterosexual behaviour and gender constructs should be normative. Heteronormativity refers, in sum, to "the myriad ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon" (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 478). In South Africa, as in most societies, heteronormativity, and its associated traditional nuclear family is the prevailing norm. The nuclear, legally married, heterosexual couple, is the standard against which all other forms of family are evaluated (Lubbe, 2007). While the last two decades have acknowledged important shifts in Western societies perception of same-gendered families, challenging prevailing discourses of heteronormativity and altering how modern societies perceive what constitutes a family, the heterosexual couple remains entrenched as the normative form of adult sexual relationships (Lubbe, 2007). These unchallenged beliefs construct a dominant narrative of what a family looks like or should be, turning same-gendered families into different and 'other' (Lubbe, 2007). Due to

this heteronormativity, accompanied by discrimination and homophobia, there is still a stigma attached to lesbians and their relationships and families. The mostly international research available on lesbians, discussed in this chapter, points to the overriding similarities between lesbian couples and their families, and those of their heterosexual counterparts. Yet lesbian-headed families continue to challenge current predominant cultural standards and existing ideas of family, simultaneously transgressing and reproducing heteronormative assumptions about childhood, motherhood and family (Folgerø, 2008).

Being a lesbian is often perceived as a deviant and marginal identity, while motherhood is generally indicative of a nurturing mainstream identity. Researchers have examined how lesbians' transitions to motherhood affect their position within the heteronormative context, as well as how they negotiate this divide between marginal and mainstream (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Bradley & Du Chesne, 2007). Due to the assumption that she is heterosexual, lesbian mothers regularly experience social legitimacy on the basis of their motherhood status. Their sexual identities are, as a consequence, often abolished or made less publicly visible by motherhood. The identity of lesbian mothers has, therefore, been characterised as one of constant change as a result of the conflict between the marginalised status of lesbianism with the socially revered status of motherhood (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). In some cultures, the opportunity for motherhood has highlighted the issue of what makes a 'true' lesbian. Some lesbian scholars argue that lesbian motherhood is an impossibility, in that lesbian mothers take on a role which is characteristic of women's servitude in a patriarchal culture, and leave their rightful place among lesbians (Brown, 1995). Lesbian mothers have also described their sense of being deprived of their lesbian identity by the more detectable identity of motherhood, which is powerfully aligned with heterosexuality in the prevailing discourse (Brown, 1995). This loss of lesbian identity leads to feelings of invisibility amongst other lesbians. When lesbian mothers are mindful not to be assumed to be heterosexual, their motherhood inevitably counteracts the public perception wherein lesbians are assumed to deviate from the normative category of 'woman'. Research also suggests that being both lesbian and a mother are not always viewed as conflicting states of being (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006). By choosing motherhood, lesbians are sometimes seen as aligning with the convention of the cultural context in which they live. The transition to motherhood can make it easier for lesbians to be accepted by others. It facilitates their social acceptance, and their mainstream identity as motherhood supersedes their marginal identity as lesbians (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006). As Nancy Polikoff remarks, "My experience, is that straight women clearly feel that my choice to have a child balances my choice to be a lesbian and makes me more normal, easier to understand, woman, less of a challenge to

their lives" (Calhoun, 2000, p. 136). By becoming mothers, lesbians are, effectively, helping others to comprehend and relate to their lives, with family and friends often enthusiastically supporting their desire to become parents (Dunne, 2000). Being a lesbian mother is, therefore, often considered easier than being 'just' a lesbian woman as it would appear that their motherhood status is seen as somewhat compensating for their marginal status (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006).

3.10. Voluntary childfree couples

Snitow (1992) argued that a feminist agenda that serves all women must acknowledge and support women who choose to mother as well as those who do not. Childfree women indicate a profound divergence from the dominant understanding that womanhood and motherhood are inseparable (Gillespie, 2003). Indeed, a growing number of women resist and challenge the pronatalist mandates of femininity that fuse womanhood with motherhood, emphasising the development of a positive female identity that has emerged separately from motherhood. This challenge to pronatalism need not reject motherhood but should rather seek to distance female identity from mothering in a way that benefits all women (Kelly, 2010). Because freedom calls for choice, reproductive freedom is jeopardised when the voices of childless women are missing. Therefore, while feminists have, for many years, focused on the goal of reproductive freedom, true reproductive freedom needs the focus to be on the lives of both mothers *and* non-mothers. Social conditions need to support a woman's choice to be a mother, but not require it (Morell, 2000). As Hird (2003) argues, is it precisely due to this powerful link between women and reproduction, that there is a lack of knowledge regarding those women who choose not to have children and therefore reject the association between women and motherhood.

3.10.1. Childfree heterosexual women

Feminist approaches to couples' voluntary childlessness have been less concerned about the causes, focusing rather on gendered cultural narratives that shape perceptions and experiences of childlessness (Gillespie, 2000; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Morell, 2000). They argue that one way in which culture reinforces gender inequalities is via the support of a gender identity linked to motherhood. Despite the normative assumption of motherhood as the foundation of feminine identity and highest fulfilment for women, some women choose to reject being a mother and its association with the universal concept of femininity (Kelly, 2010). From this perspective, for some women choosing to be childfree represents an opportunity for them to withdraw from a fundamental component of women's oppression.

As noted by feminists in the 1980s, the language used in research contributes to an unnatural view of women who remain voluntarily childfree (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004). A woman's right to choose between various reproductive technologies and abortion has challenged the patriarchal myth that women's inevitable destiny is motherhood. However, for women who discover that they are infertile, this 'choice' is impossible. Alternatively, the term 'childfree' implies a positive choice. Therefore, during the second wave of feminism, a move was made towards the term childfree in an effort to neutralise the negative connotations of not having children. However, many people still consider the choice to be childfree a selfish one (Letherby & Williams, 1999).

Maternal feminism, as Morell (2000) noted, has given voice to women's motherhood experiences and perspectives but has also obscured the voices of childfree women. However, feminist scholarship in the area of childfree couples is increasing, as researchers further explore resistance and social change to this new pronatalism (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004). Letherby and Williams (1999) have emphasised that an awareness of the complexity of non-motherhood is crucial to feminism because not all women share the same realities or experiences. While there are no easy solutions to these concerns, feminist discussions regarding motherhood have allowed for the consideration of an alternative way of life – with no children of one's own. The challenge, however, is the need for an inquiry into the subjective experiences of voluntarily childfree women, which would validate non-reproduction as an equally viable option (Morell, 2000).

There is limited South African literature available on heterosexual childfree women; however, international literature has shown that research into reasons for the increase in rates of voluntary childlessness has focused mainly on major social advances including the feminist movement, expanding reproductive choices, and women's growing participation in the labour force (Gillespie, 2003). While limited literature focusing on childfree women's challenge of gender norms arose prior to the 2000's (Morell, 1993), the past seventeen years have seen increased attention from researchers adopting a feminist approach to the gendered characteristics of voluntary childlessness (Gillespie, 2003; Hird, 2003; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Maher & Saugeres, 2007). Their findings regarding heterosexual women's explanations and motivations for remaining childfree are as varied, complex and at times contradictory as those for having children. Factors most often stated include greater freedom, quality of relationships, career and financial considerations, early socialisation experiences and concerns about the physical aspects of pregnancy and giving birth (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Gillespie, 2003; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Letherby, 2002). In South Africa, a few recent qualitative studies have looked at the experiences of childfree women. Bimha

and Chadwick (2016) used thematic analysis to explore the ways in which a small sample of seven heterosexual childfree women negotiate their childfree identity in the South African pronatalist context. Their participant's reasons for choosing to be childfree included both practical reasons such as finances and lack of a suitable partner, as well as awareness of the duties and activities associated with motherhood, and their personal career and academic goals. They negotiated the pronatalist norms and expectations through a variety of active and passive strategies, in alignment with feminist theoretical views that women engage in active reproductive decision-making (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016). In an unpublished master's thesis, Nebbe (2011) used a feminist social constructionist approach to research five South African heterosexual women's reasons for remaining childfree. In addition to reasons which echoed existing literature, such as freedom from childcare activities and the opportunity to pursue self-fulfilment, the women in this study additionally felt that motherhood was not central to their femininity, and that, perhaps contextually specific, the world is an unsafe space in to which to bring children (Nebbe, 2011). While there is a growing body of research into the phenomenon of voluntary childfree heterosexual women, less is known about the significance, motivation and experience of lesbians choosing to remain childfree and 'opting out' of motherhood.

3.10.2. Childfree lesbians

Nancy Polikoff (cited in Morell, 2000, p. 315) asked the lesbian community, "Who is talking about the women who don't ever want to be mothers?" And her answer was, "No one". While many lesbians are opting out of motherhood, we know little about why. Brewster, Tillman and Jokinen-Gordon (2014) found that fewer than 18% of lesbians in the United States have had children compared to 67% of heterosexual women. While more lesbians attain parenthood through pathways other than biology (e.g. adoption), the findings presented in Brewster et al. (2014) confirm that lesbians are significantly less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to bear children. Naturally, sexual relationships within same-sex couples do not result in pregnancy and children. However, this is not the only variable. As a matter of fact, heterosexual adults without children demonstrate more compelling desires and intentions for parenthood, compared with lesbians without children, even when demographic differences are taken into account (Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Psychological factors, therefore, would appear to be partly responsible for the different rates of parenthood.

Various psychological factors might reflect the social and legal impediments facing lesbian adults who want to have children. These include adoption restrictions, service refusals from

reproductive health providers (Riskind et al., 2013) as well as society's stigma against families formed outside of heterosexual marriage (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). Options for lesbian motherhood - such as artificial reproductive technologies, adoption and surrogacy - can also be prohibitively expensive. Awareness of these kinds of obstacles to parenthood for same-sex couples, however valid, may themselves influence parenthood decisions (Riskind et al., 2013). While there have been limited qualitative studies on woman choosing to be childfree that have included lesbian participants (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016; Gillespie, 2003; Graham, Hill, Taket, & Shelley, 2013; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992; Mezey, 2008a; Riskind & Patterson, 2010), there have been various limitations. Firstly, most of these studies have focused on comparing individual lesbian and heterosexual women, or not distinguishing between the two at all. Secondly, only one of the studies included lesbian couples (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016). Thirdly, much of the research has been conducted from a sociological or demographic perspective (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016; Mezey, 2008a, 2008b) focusing primarily on describing the socio-economic, racial and cultural makeup of childfree lesbians, and less on their subjective experiences. Finally, the current research has been based on United States, United Kingdom, Scandinavian, Australian and European populations, where for some, in comparison to South Africa, legal limitations for same-sex couples - such as the right to marry, adopt and gain access to reproductive technologies - may provide additional barriers to motherhood for lesbian couples in those countries. As Blackstone (2014) and Kelly (2010) highlight, the experiences of lesbian couples who decide not to mother remain largely unexplored and warrant additional attention.

3.11. Conclusion

There is a need to understand why and how lesbian couples are choosing not to have children, specifically at a time when more parenting options are available, fewer legal barriers exist and research supports the positive outcomes of their parenting abilities.

Missing from the literature are the voices of the lesbian couples themselves, and their experiences of choosing to be childfree at a time when motherhood is an available option, in a pronatalist society which still conflates motherhood with womanhood. Without their voices, our understanding of women choosing to opt out of motherhood cannot be considered complete, and we run the risk of omitting the experiences and voices of those women who do not fit within the dominant heterosexual norms.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research design and method selected for this study. My role as a researcher, the quality criteria for the research, as well as ethical considerations are discussed.

4.1. Study aims

The goal of this study was to explore childfree lesbian couples' motivations for, and experiences of choosing child freedom. Therefore, I aimed firstly, to listen and give voice to lesbian couples choosing to remain childfree, despite opportunities for motherhood. Secondly, to contribute towards a more refined understanding of lesbian couples and the ways in which they challenge predominant assumptions of womanhood. Thirdly, by including lesbian women, who do not fit within the dominant heterosexual norm, I aimed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of women who choose to opt out of motherhood.

4.2. Research design

Due to the limited research available on childfree lesbian couples within the South African context, an exploratory study was conducted. The study made use of a qualitative research design, in accordance with the feminist social constructionist framework which informs this research. Social constructionism takes the constructive power of language as a key assumption. Therefore, the analysis of language is central to social constructionist research methods. While no one particular research method is intrinsically feminist social constructionist, the emphasis placed by both social constructionism and feminism upon the importance of the social meaning of interactions and language leads logically to the use of qualitative methods as the research instruments of choice (Burr, 2003). A qualitative method is therefore appropriate for this study when considering their shared concerns and objectives, highlighted below.

Qualitative methods are used when the researcher is concerned with and interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, the meaning people construct based on their experiences in the world, and how they make sense of their lives within a social context (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009; Willig, 2008). Qualitative methods are used when

the main research objective is to describe and, if possible, explain human experiences, located within their social contexts (Willig, 2008). The goal of the qualitative researcher is, therefore, to try to understand or interpret a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people assign to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

From a feminist standpoint, qualitative methods are also more likely to respect and acknowledge the experiences of female research participants (Clarke & Peel, 2005). A feminist social constructionist approach further requires that knowledge and understanding are obtained by engaging in a relationship with the research topic and participants, rather than by adopting a detached and objective stance (Fairtlough, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Therefore, a qualitative research design employing semi-structured in-depth interviews as the specific method for data collection was appropriate for this study.

4.3. Participants

As the aim of the study was to explore childfree lesbian couples' motivations for and experiences of choosing child freedom, I interviewed ten couples who have not only reached a point in their lives where they have faced and made the decision to be childfree, but who have also had the opportunities to consider motherhood as an option, and nonetheless chosen not to have children. Studies have shown that voluntarily childfree women are disproportionately white, full-time employed, non-religious and living in urban areas, with higher income and education levels and less conservative beliefs (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Mezey, 2008b). This is, therefore, the demographic group that I targeted. I am aware that the participant sample is relatively homogeneous and in no way representative of all South African lesbian couples. The reality, however, is that in South Africa this demographic group have the privilege of 'choice' with regards to having children or not - due to their economic means. They therefore have access to motherhood via options such as reproductive technologies, sperm donors, or adoption.

For reasons of convenience and access, the study was undertaken within the Cape Town municipality where I live and work. Participants were self-identified middle-class white lesbian couples, aged 30-49, who are in committed relationships ranging in length from two to twelve years and have made the voluntary decision not to have children, and who have no children from prior relationships. Couples within this age range and relationship stage span the divide between young and middle adulthood and are, therefore, facing the associated developmental challenges and opportunities presented by this period. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development posits that adults at this age are moving from the

psychosocial task of developing intimacy (a committed relationship) towards the task of generativity and care (Blieszner, 2006). Generativity (as opposed to stagnation) refers to adults concerning themselves with enriching their own and other people's lives, via various means, including raising children (Blieszner, 2006). Lesbians tend to become mothers at a higher age, approximately 35, compared with heterosexual women (Bos et al., 2005; Goldberg, 2006). Therefore, by selecting couples in the stated life stage and age group, they are at a stage where the choice to have children or not is perhaps most relevant.

As a gay woman living in Cape Town, I recruited the initial participant couples via the snowball sampling technique, using my social network to access lesbian couples, as this recruitment method is particularly useful when researching groups or phenomena which are considered invalid or 'hidden' by society (Browne, 2005). New participants were recruited by asking initial participant couples to suggest additional participants (Browne, 2005) who might be willing to participate and who met the criteria for the study, and to provide me with their contact details. I then approached the suggested couples via email or telephone call and invited them to participate. I sent each invited couple the informed consent forms (Appendix A) which outlined the research purpose and participant requirements. There were a handful of couples approached who declined to participate as they were still in the process of deciding whether or not to have a child, but all couples who self-identified as voluntarily childfree were willing to participate. Theoretical sampling was used to determine the number of participants recruited for the study and is referred to in more detail as part of the procedure, outlined in 4.4.3. Twenty participants, made up of ten couples, were interviewed as a dyad, and their demographic makeup is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Details of Research Participants

Couple	Name	Age	Race	Language	Level of education	Employment status	Annual income	Relationship duration (yrs.)	Marital status
1	Sarah	39	White	English	Diploma	Self Employed	200,000+	8	Married
	Jesabel	49	White	English	High School	Self Employed	200,000+	8	Married
2	Fiona	40	White	English	High School	Self Employed	200,000+	9	Unmarried
	Nicky	41	White	English	Degree	Part Time	R0-50,000	9	Unmarried
3	Samantha	36	White	English	Degree	Full time	200,000+	3,5	Married
	Melanie	30	White	English	High School	Full time	200,000+	3,5	Married
4	Sky	38	White	English	Degree	Full time	200,000+	6,5	Married
	Alex	35	White	English	Diploma	Self Employed	200,000+	6,5	Married
5	Jane	43	White	English	Diploma	Full time	200,000+	4	Engaged
	Beth	35	White	English	Diploma	Full time	200,000+	4	Engaged
6	Amanda	45	White	English	Diploma	Full time	200,000+	10	Married
	Genevieve	38	White	Afrikaans	High School	Full time	200,000+	10	Married
7	Daniella	39	White	Afrikaans	Diploma	Full time	200,000+	12	Married
	Helen	47	White	English	Degree	Self Employed	200,000+	12	Married
8	Karen	34	White	English	Postgraduate	Full time	200,000+	5,5	Unmarried
	Bridgette	38	White	Afrikaans	Postgraduate	Full time	200,000+	5,5	Unmarried
9	Sacha	35	White	English	Postgraduate	Self Employed	200,000+	6	Unmarried
	Anna	40	White	English	Degree	Full time	200,000+	6	Unmarried
10	Simone	33	White	English	Diploma	Self Employed	200,000+	2	Unmarried
	Jessica	37	White	English	Diploma	Full time	200,000+	2	Unmarried

4.4. Method

4.4.1. The Listening Guide

The Listening Guide is a qualitative, feminist method developed over thirty years ago by Brown, Gilligan, and colleagues as a systematic means of working with interview data (Koelsch, 2015). It is a method designed to facilitate psychological discovery (Gilligan, 2015) and provides an alternative to traditional coding data analysis methods, which often reduce complex data to predetermined categories as a step toward quantification (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008). The Listening Guide method rejects positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions and allows for work outside of the rationalism and reductionism of traditional discourses (Koelsch, 2015). The method was developed to be particularly attuned to the ways in which female participants tend to speak and has been used as an analytic tool for researching various populations, usually marginalised or otherwise unheard groups, making it appropriate for research with childfree same-sex couples. For this study, it provided methodical but flexible guidelines for the systematic collection and interpretive analysis of the participant couples' experiences. By attending to the interplay of voices within the interview data, to the dynamics of the research

relationship, and to the cultural setting of the research, it established a contextual framework for understanding meaning (Gilligan, 2015).

4.4.2. Data collection: Semi-structured dyadic interviews

In order to obtain rich, detailed data for the purposes of answering the research question, I conducted one-off, in-depth semi-structured interviews administered in a relational interviewing style with all ten participant couples. These interviews are best suited to yielding complex narratives and thoughtful internal reflections which are particularly appropriate to the research aim and method (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008). Open-ended questions from a preliminary interview schedule (Appendix B) were used to focus on eliciting specific, concrete experiences as well as rich, detailed data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008). Questions posed to the participants allowed them to share life experience, while I listened to their answers, following the cadence, rhythm, and tone of narratives for information about the threads that warranted following and where to go next (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). I began by asking each couple questions about how they met, and how they would describe their lives together. This was to put participants at ease and to get a sense of them as a couple. I posed these initial question to the couple, rather than to each individual participant in turn. Using this approach enabled me to attain a discussed version of events from each couple in which the partners were able to contribute their individual responses to the construction of an agreed narrative. (Touroni & Coyle, 2002). Asking questions in this manner meant that as individuals they were not obligated to answer immediately, and could look to each other to initiate their responses. I felt that this put couples at ease more quickly, as it allowed their natural relationship dynamic to play out, in terms of who was more outspoken or comfortable in the moment. I then asked questions more specific to the research question, regarding their feelings towards children in general and having and raising children specifically, as well as questions regarding how they viewed family, their identity, and their future as a childfree couple. What attracted them to being childfree, and what, if anything, influenced their choice not to have children, if they had considered that option. Interviews lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes each. During the interviews, I remained conscious of the importance of delving into the phenomenon under research. At times this required momentarily abandoning the interview protocol to follow participants where they wanted to lead me (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). I attempted to engage with each participant equally through the interviews, and when faced with a more dominant partner, would turn to and ask questions directly of the more deferential individual, so as to ensure that, as far as possible, both voices were included in response to each question. I found all the participants forthcoming, open to sharing their opinions, and willing

to engage with the questions and provide thoughtful, considered responses. There were many instances where a participant would comment that she would not usually openly share a particular opinion, outside of the interview context, and I often felt taken into confidence by the participants. At times the interviews had an almost confessional nature, specifically with regards to participants' feelings around children and lesbian family formation. Many participants commented on finding it interesting to have to think explicitly about the topics discussed. The partners either learnt something new about each other or found an opportunity to 'check in' with each other. None of the couples expressed distress or a need for counselling referrals, although sometimes reflecting on family or negative experiences lead to participants openly expressing sadness, regret or frustration. I felt that overall the couples had a positive response to the interviews, and relished the opportunity to voice their opinions.

4.4.3. Procedure

Ethical clearance was obtained from Stellenbosch University Human Research Ethics committee, number SU-HSD-001687, before conducting this study (Appendix C). After ethical clearance was obtained, I began recruiting couples to participate in the research. As a gay woman, I have multiple lesbian couples in my social circles, many of whom were aware of the research study I was embarking upon. I found that these close friends who knew of my research began suggesting couples who fit the selection criteria (see 4.3 above). I approached the first two couples who had been suggested and emailed them to outline what participation entailed, as well as the informed consent letter to read through. Once they had agreed to participate, dates and times were set up. The first interviews were organised outside working hours over weekends at my offices in Observatory, Cape Town, when the offices were not used by work colleagues, and at a time convenient for both myself and the participants. A meeting room was used for the interviews, providing a safe and private space. The participants were provided with consent forms and given the opportunity to read through them again and to ask any questions before we began. Informed consent was then obtained before the interviews begin (see Appendix A), including permission to make audio recordings of the interviews. Participants were also informed that, should they wish to do so, they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Given the possibility that some of the participants might know each other and therefore be able to identify each other (due to the snowballing sample technique that I used), I thought it important to reassure them that I would keep their information confidential and that I would take care not to provide identifying information in the transcripts nor the final thesis. I initially conducted interviews with two couples. These interviews were transcribed and then

analysed according to the Listening Guide method (Gilligan, 2015). Once the analyses of these initial interviews were completed and reviewed by my supervisor, the interview schedule was reviewed to ensure that it addressed the relevant areas and that no further information was required to assist in addressing theoretical issues (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). No changes were made to the interview schedule, and subsequent interviews were then arranged and conducted.

The interviews were conducted jointly with each couple. Interviewing couples conjointly produced multiple perspectives which provided rich data (Mellor, Slaymaker, & Cleland, 2013). Understanding that there was a risk of losing the individual's perspective, or of participants limiting what they would say out of concern for the other partner, the additional separate interview offered provided the opportunity for individuals to reflect on anything that may have been left unsaid, or that they preferred to contribute alone. Using joint interviews and offering the option of separate interviews with the same participants provided all the benefits of couple interviews while minimising the risk, particularly when the subject matter is something which would already have been shared within the couple, and when interaction analysis is an inevitable goal of the research, as in this proposed study (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010).

All couples were asked to have one-on-one follow up interviews, to give each partner an opportunity to have their say without their partner present. Only one couple did so, and, I feel, more out of a sense of following instructions than feeling the need to say anything further. All the other couples were adamant that they did not need or want individual interviews, as they had nothing to hide from each other, had said all that they had to say on the subject and/or had nothing further to add. While I cannot know if anyone was reluctant to speak out in front of their partner, I had the sense that the couples were very open, forthcoming, and I had no reason to believe otherwise. Difficult subjects were discussed, disagreements were acknowledged, and there were frequent references made to an awareness of controversial statements being made, previously concealed opinions shared. I believe that the participant couples were honest, open and forthcoming in their interviews and, therefore, did not try to push them to do individual interviews as I saw no benefit in doing so.

I conducted the interviews in English, my first language, and the first language of all but three of the participants, who were bilingual, and fluent in English. At the beginning of the interview, a questionnaire was used (see Appendix D), to collect participants' demographic information, including age, home language, race, income level, employment status,

education level and relationship duration, in order to obtain a more complete picture of the context of the participant sample.

The final number of participants was determined by the ongoing analysis of the data. Once a point was reached at which the same themes arose repeatedly and saturation of data was achieved (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008), no further interviews were conducted.

4.4.4. Transcribing of interviews

Interviews were audio recorded - with the participants' permission - and I personally transcribed all the interviews verbatim, ensuring respect for the participant's language by including their pauses, inflections, unfinished sentences, and overlapping speech (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The interviews were also transcribed in as short a time period as possible after the interviews were conducted, while my memories of the experience were still vivid and I could reflect on my own responses and feelings. Immediately after completing the transcription, I added my own observations and notes to the transcripts, indicating where a participant became emotional or gestured in a particular way to their partner, or in some way communicated in a manner which would not explicitly be captured in the audio recording. I did this to add additional depth to the transcripts, and to assist in accurately recalling and reflecting the context of responses made by participants. I then emailed the individual transcribed interviews to half of the respective participants and requested that they provide input regarding the accuracy of their interviews. I received no changes to the original transcriptions.

4.4.5. Data analysis

Data analysis is not a phase of the research process confined to the analysis of interview transcripts, but rather an ongoing process which takes place throughout the life of the research project. The interpretive work starts when the sample of couples participating in the study is first accessed. The first interview was tentative, as I actively listened to their stories, asked questions, and made decisions regarding which issues I needed to follow up, which I needed to put to one side, and where to explore further (Fairtlough, 2007). I was guided by my initial research aim, what each couple chose to share, and my interpretation and understanding of their words. As the interviews progressed, I became more comfortable, more aware of how to follow the threads of the interview, and to uncover deeper meaning behind initial responses. Once the interviews were completed, the process

of analysis continued in a more explicit way, using the method outlined in the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015), as described next.

After I had transcribed each interview, I read the text at least four times, to listen for four 'voices.' Step 1: Listening for the plot: this step involves two parts. I listened firstly for the plot, the narrative of the story being told (Step 1a) and secondly my response to the interview (Step 1b) (Kayser, Watson, & Andrade, 2007). In practical terms, the participant's words were laid out in one column, and my responses and interpretations were placed in a column alongside (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). This step involves first creating a summary of the plot of the transcript. What story are the participants telling me, who is saying what, to whom, and what narrative is being constructed. In the second part of this step, I captured my response to the narrative. I wrote down how I was affected by what I heard, the thoughts and feelings I experienced as I listened to the participants' responses. Due to the need for me to protect the confidentiality of my participants, I am unable to provide and share sample evidence of this step. However, subsequent steps will include evidence of the method used. Step 2: I-Poems and We-Poems: in this step I focused on creating I-Poems, by underlining the use of the pronoun 'I' and the accompanying verbs throughout the transcripts, and then taking the underlined sections and listing them in sequential order, under one another, to form I-Poems. These I-Poems locate the participants' sense of agency and self throughout the text and allow for both myself, as the researcher, and the reader of the final analysis to enter the text at an emotional level, and thus to increased understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. Because I am working with couples, I also composed We-poems, which include all instances of the word 'we' and the associated verbs, in order to highlight the relational nature of the subject matter (Koelsch, 2015). An example of this step, to demonstrate how I have implemented the specific data analysis method, is included as Appendix E. Step 3: Listening for contrapuntal voices: in this step, the focus of the analysis is brought back to the research question. I read the transcripts once more and identified voices which threaded through the text which related to the research question. These voices are often contrapuntal, and this step highlights the tensions and contradictions between these voices. The Listening Guide analysis entails reading transcripts sequentially for instances of each of these voices, leading to the creation of interpretive worksheets or memos (Davis, 2015), as shown in an example of this step in Appendix F.

The Listening Guide method of analysis produced large quantities of text data, in excess of four hundred pages. In order to obtain a clearer overview of the identified voices, I took all text related to the first voice I identified and copied all related text into one non-stop

narrative. In other words, all text related to a particular voice was collated from across all transcripts and placed in the order it appeared in the text. Completing this for each voice provided me with pages of flowing text all related to a specific identified voice, distilled from multiple individual transcripts, as seen in a sample provided in Appendix G. Doing so provided me with greater clarity, a deeper understanding of the voices and, as a novice researcher, ease of reference and the ability to work more easily with the extensive volumes of data generated by the Listening Guide method. In the data analysis, which follows in Chapter 5, the excerpts provided in the analysis are taken from these voices, with each excerpt representing a particular voice heard across multiple participants. The I-Poems used to illustrate the analysis each represent an individual participant's voice, as per the Listening Guide method. Step 4: Composing an analysis: in this step, I tied together all of these voices in order to create a coherent narrative (Koelsch, 2015). In this final step, having gone through the text four times, creating notes and summaries each time, I compiled what had been learnt about the couples with regards to the research question. In this step, my research question guided me towards the voices in the text that spoke to my inquiry (Gilligan, 2015). I composed a final analysis of the interviews, combining and synthesising what had been learnt throughout the process. Questions regarding the initial research aim could then be deliberated. What have I learnt about my research question and how have I come to know it? What information am I basing my interpretations on (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006)? In this study, which includes multiple interviews, the Listening Guide analyses were also compared with one another, highlighting similarities and differences that emerged across them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006).

4.5. Assessing qualitative research

4.5.1. Trustworthiness

Psychological research, such as this proposed study, can challenge hegemonic assumptions about how things are or how they are said to be (Gilligan, 2015). Conducting qualitative research with a focus on couples' stories, I had a responsibility to create conditions in which participants could safely tell their stories to someone who is listening and who could be trusted to bring their voices into conversations about human experience. The Listening Guide is one step towards realising this aspiration (Gilligan, 2015).

As with all research, credible results rely on a good research design, which demands that careful consideration is given to purpose, research questions, and methods of data collection and analysis. For the Listening Guide analyses to be persuasive, I, as the

researcher, had to be rigorous and systematic in the application of the method and the documentation of the analysis process, including how voices were defined and identified in the text. Findings reached at each individual level of analysis were carefully documented for each case, as evidenced in Appendices F, G and H, and significant attention was given to a thoughtful integration of these separate findings to produce a compelling research analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008), as presented in Chapter 5.

Qualitative research relies on alternative criteria when compared to the quantitative standards of reliability and validity (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Rather than the validity and a definitive version of reality, these alternative criteria emphasise the validation of diverse narratives of participant realities, and congruence among researchers (Angen, 2000). Therefore, the research goal is not one of ubiquitously true statements regarding lesbian couples choosing to be childfree, but rather to provide a reliable account (Angen, 2000) of the participant couples' experiences. Many qualitative analyses are limited by ambiguous and ill-defined procedures (Kayser et al., 2007). However, as the Listening Guide is a rigorous and well-studied qualitative method, the validity of the research analysis can be evaluated from within the guidelines it provides (Koelsch, 2015). Given that the analyses are created via the specific steps provided, there is a standard method which I followed without deviation. Each step in the execution of the research procedure and data analysis was examined, in consultation with my supervisor, to ensure their accuracy, consistency and relevance. The individual data analyses were also reviewed by my supervisor for reliability, and any disagreements discussed until a consensus was reached (Kayser et al., 2007). This ongoing process of collaboration with my supervisor further enhanced validity by ensuring that the research study was executed systematically and precisely. According to Gee, (cited in Starks & Trinidad, 2007) the analytic credibility of the research relies on the coherence of the final analyses and discussion which will be judged by the examiners and readers of this work. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of the analysis is enhanced by the use of excerpts from the voices identified across multiple participants, and the I-Poems - each of which represents an individual participant - to support the discussion points and whether they produce a convincing result (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Finally, the credibility of this research is enhanced by peer review (Morrow & Smith, 2000). My supervisor and I met to discuss Steps 1 and 2 of the Listening Guide analysis which I had at that point completed across interviews 1 through 7. We cross-checked the analysis and discussed the potential contrapuntal voices to listen for and tentatively identify in Step 3. As a further form of cross-checking, my supervisor identified random selections of my Step 1a analysis, and I provided the corresponding analysis for Step1b, which we then

discussed, to ensure that the two steps of analysis were aligned. That is, was the content of my response provided in Step 1b in alignment with the narrative written up in Step 1a? My supervisor and I read the transcribed manuscripts and selected some of the data analyses from each step in the Listening Guide method to ensure that we agreed upon the findings and meanings, the I-Poems and the final analysis (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006). In these ways, every effort was made to reduce researcher bias and to ensure credibility and validity during each step of the research process (Laney, Hall, Anderson, & Willingham, 2015).

4.5.2. Reflexivity

A narrative is composed conjointly, relying on both the interview questions and the experiences of the participants, as well as the 'social location' of both. As a result, any sharing of an experience may be affected by gender, race, class, age, sexual orientation, religion and personal history - all elements that build relationships between us (Gilligan, 2003). I, therefore, had to remain continuously aware of my own response as a researcher (Fairtlough, 2007) documented through reflexive memos (Davis, 2015). Reflexivity required that I remain aware of how I contributed to the co-construction of meanings throughout the research process, as well as acknowledging the impossibility of remaining an outsider to my subject matter while engaging in research (Willig, 2008). Reflexivity attempts to place the researcher on the same level as the participants through an explicit positioning of the researcher in the research (Harding, cited in Ironstone-Catterall, 1998). This is done in an effort to understand the broad socio-historical constructions of race, class, and culture and how they influence understandings of and assumptions about both the researcher and other participants in the study. In the following section, I outline the key aspects related to my own personhood that could have played a role in shaping the data and analysis.

Due to the nature of snowball sampling utilised in this study, I was not a blank slate or unknown researcher to all the participants. One couple knew me directly, three couples through mutual friends or acquaintances, and six couples were unknown to me and were invited to participate by the other participants. Most participants therefore either knew or assumed upfront that I was gay, or asked directly (but always after the interview). There were both advantages and disadvantages to being known. Knowing my sexual orientation could have led to participants having felt more comfortable talking to me about their relationships and opinions regarding children than they would have if talking to a heterosexual researcher. However, both parties may also have unconsciously assumed that our shared sexuality made for shared views and experiences in other areas, resulting in things being left unsaid or unclarified, due to the assumed common understanding. I,

therefore, had to ensure that I did not make assumptions, but rather explored the participants' answers to ensure that their individual views were comprehensively represented.

Participants who had not known me previously were curious as to my motherhood status and how I felt about children. While these questions were only broached to me after the interview, it was often presumed that my position on the issues being discussed would be one of agreement and congruence with the opinions being shared. Participants, therefore, spoke openly with me about issues they assumed would be viewed negatively by mothers, such as a lack of maternal desire. The data obtained was, therefore, perhaps more honest and unfiltered than it might otherwise have been if a heterosexual mother was the researcher.

I was aware of my similarity, on many levels, to the participants. However, I realised that while we are all part of a seemingly homogenous group, each couple, each individual, had their own story to tell, their opinions and feelings shaped by the unique contexts of their lives. At times, listening to the stories being told felt familiar and easily relatable, but I was also mindful of how often my views and feelings were different, and how I needed to recognise and set aside my assumptions, with the "analytic goal of attending to my participants' accounts with an open mind" (Starks & Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376). After each interview I would write up my personal response in a journal, and also shared and discussed portions of this personal writing with my supervisor. This kept me attuned to my internal thought process and response and assisted in differentiating my own ideas and feelings from those of the participants.

Throughout this study, I constantly remained aware of my position as a privileged, white, liberal, urban, gay woman with the access and means to enjoy a certain level of freedom of choice, especially with regards to reproductive choices. This position influenced the questions I asked on the subject matter, and therefore the results I obtained, which provide a narrow view of lesbian motherhood, not applicable to many other South African lesbians. But I was equally aware that by using this privileged position which allows me to be outspoken, I could also potentially assist in revealing the changing norms and expectations regarding same-sex couples.

4.6. Ethical considerations

A suitable method is one that provides a way of getting the necessary results but is also an ethical method. In psychological inquiry adopting a relational stance, the ethics of research becomes an ethic of relationships (Gilligan, 2015). This affects every aspect of the research encounter from how I approached the participants to how I write about them when writing up the analyses (Gilligan, 2015). Before initiating the research process, ethical clearance for this study was obtained (Appendix C). All written material or participant recruitment discussions emphasised that participation for both partners in the couple was voluntary. Participant couples received an explanation of the research aim, procedure and potential consequences prior to the interviews. Before the start of the interview, participants completed consent forms and were reminded that they did not have to be interviewed, could decline to answer any question, and could stop the interview at any time (Mellor et al., 2013). Participating couples were also offered access to the audio recording of their own interview upon request.

Maintaining the confidentiality of what was said in the interviews was of utmost importance. My supervisor and I were, therefore, the only individuals with access to interview recordings and viewing the transcripts. Once the interviews were transcribed, the recordings were deleted. Electronic transcripts were saved in a secure, password protected file. Electronic copies of the voices and analyses were stored in a secure location. Data will be deleted and destroyed once it is no longer needed. Participant confidentiality was ensured by asking couples to choose pseudonyms for themselves which were unrelated to their own identity. These pseudonyms were then used throughout the data analysis and research writing up process. Only my supervisor and I, therefore, know the identity of the participants and the participants' confidentiality has been protected and upheld.

The subject matter of the study is of a personal and potentially sensitive nature for the participants. They may have, as a result, experienced some psychological discomfort during or after the interviews. Therefore, contact details for free follow-up advice, and/or counselling services (FAMSA) were provided to the participants as a precaution.

While there was a potential for negative impact on the participants, it was balanced by possible benefits to participants. One potential benefit to participants of the study was the opportunity to share and reflect on their experience as a couple, which they may not have done before. Additionally, there was the benefit of a greater understanding of same-sex

women choosing not to have children, as well as the opportunity to increase the literature available to therapists and others working with same-sex couples.

Chapter 5: Results

5.1. Introduction

The aim of this research was to identify and introduce the voices of one group of childfree South African lesbian couples, who do not fit within the dominant heterosexual norm, and to explore the ways in which they challenge predominant assumptions around what it means to be childfree and lesbian in the South African context, thereby enhancing our understanding of a diversity of women opting out of motherhood. In this chapter, I present and discuss the major and minor voices that I identified in this regard. The two major voices and their associated minor voices are outlined below:

Conscious Voice	Covert Voice
• No Maternal Instinct	• Unnatural
• Obstacles	• If I Could Have, I Would Have
• An Alternative Path	• Inequality

In the following sections, each of these voices is presented and described, using excerpts of the Voices, (each Voice represents a strand identified across multiple participants during the data analysis, see 4.4.5. For an example, see Addendum H) which evolved from the interviews, and I-Poems (each of which represents an extract from a section of one participant's transcribed interview, see 4.4.5. For an example, see Addendum F) from passages of participant data to illustrate them. At times in this chapter, I will use the term discourse which may seem at odds/dissonant with the terminology used within the Listening Guide. I therefore want to note here that I use it in both the general sense, as language, and the more specific sense as a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images which in some way produce a particular version of events (Burr, 2003; Potgieter, 2003) through which beliefs and understandings about the world are constructed and conveyed (Rich et al., 2011).

5.2. Conscious Voice

The Conscious Voice is heard when participants speak with confidence, advocating for the rights available to gay women, including rights regarding marriage, adoption and having children. This voice is comfortable challenging the heteronormative status quo, clear,

certain, and assertive in its support of an alternative, childfree construction of womanhood. It is a voice which exudes confidence, speaks without hesitation, and reflects their public views regarding motherhood and child freedom. Most of the women said that they have never desired to have a child and felt that this, combined with the absence of a prescribed path to motherhood for gay women, allowed them to negotiate alternative lives. Those participants who were more open to having a child saw the path to doing so as an obstacle-laden one, which became impassable. These were all opinions that they shared comfortably and openly in public.

5.2.1. No Maternal Instinct

The majority of participants stated that they had no maternal instinct, no desire to have a child, either biological or adopted, and this emerging voice is called No Maternal Instinct. Many of the participants spoke about having never even considered having a child; it was simply never an option, and, when they were younger, had never been imagined as part of their future, as can be seen in the following extract from participants using this No Maternal instinct voice:

> *"There is no maternal or, 'oh that's so cute,' um, instinct there.'" "There's just no desire for it. There's just no desire for…I've no want for it. I never, ever thought of it, it wasn't in my head, in any way. It was never on the board; it wasn't something that I had to make peace with. It was just never something I was ever going to do. I never entertained, never even thought about it." "I don't have any maternal feelings." "It's so strange to be able to say it out loud…I have no motherly instincts. You can't be so honest about it, it's horrible, I'm just completely not interested." "I do not have a motherly—an iota of a motherly cell in my body." "I've never tried to hide that I don't want kids. Nothing changed, yes, since I was small. I really, like since I was a kid, I never had these visions of becoming a mother." "There was no wanting a child. No, not at any point have I been, 'Oh, I want to have a child.'" "It's such a foreign thing for me, to have that desire to have a child, that's a good word, foreign, so desperately and badly. Absolutely I just don't. Why? Ja, it's a very alien thing for me to understand as well. I'm like, there is not one bit of me that wants to have a child like that."*

Implicitly, participants seemed to believe that wanting and having children is driven by a felt and compelling desire for a child inside a woman:

> *"I think—some of my other friends, speak of feeling, biologically, much more drawn to having kids. And I don't feel that." "I think it's genetically, biologically, hormonally not in her [referring to partner]." "I think if anything, it's more I think a bit of a biological clock kind of thing." "Well why, you're going to want children at some time, your biological clock is going to kick in and you're, the clock's going to start ticking down and you're going to want children." "And I've never ever wanted that. Ever. It's never kicked in." "My best friend, her biological clock is ticking like you cannot believe. She's a month older than I am, and I—when I speak to her I can hear the desperation. She has to have a child…. Has to have a child, and I've never had that. I can't relate to that." "My friend is crazy. But she's like, 'My biological clock is ticking. It's got to be now. I want to be pregnant.' And she's bummed when she's not. And she's trying everything, but ja, it's nuts."*

Using the No Maternal Instinct voice, participants described finding it difficult to relate to women who expressed a strong desire to have a child, seeing a level of intensity or desperation which they could not understand, and finding the physical urge to have a child foreign. The participants positioned themselves as different from these other – largely heterosexual – women, those they assumed to have an innate biological drive to have children. In addition, when thinking about pregnancy and physically carrying the child, they repeatedly use words such as "never", "nothing", and "alien" to emphasise their sense of dissociation from the strong physical urge to have a child described by other women. Many participants also expressed strong negative feelings about pregnancy specifically, and their aversion to carrying and having a child, as reflected in this I-Poem taken from a participant describing how she feels about pregnancy (italics used to indicate participant's emphasis):

> I do *not* want to carry
> I *don't* want
> I *don't* want to be pregnant
> I find it appalling
> I do
> I'm like, it's appalling
> I just
> I find it; it's grotesque
> I imagine it for *myself.*
> I *never* want to be pregnant.

I never want have
I never want to have *that*
I never want to be opened
I never want
I don't want it.

This voice, which reflects an essentialist construction of 'maternal instinct,' did not question the biological assumption of this mainstream discourse. They, therefore, ascribed not having children to lacking in this natural instinct. Consequently, they constructed their child freedom as less a conscious decision, and rather the result of a perceived lack of biological inclination, and understood this maternal drive as being normative for other women. For these participants, motherhood is constructed on a foundation of biology, with other women longing for children, driven by maternal desire and instinct. The participants' view that they fundamentally differ from other women, regarding their lack of maternal instinct, speaks to the prevailing essentialist belief that all women instinctively want to have a child, their desire for motherhood unquestioned and inevitable (Gillespie, 2000). The participants' stated lack of maternal instincts reflects the same opinions shared by voluntary childfree heterosexual women in studies from Australia (Doyle et al., 2013), the United States (Park, 2002, 2005), Sweden (Peterson & Engwall, 2013), and lesbian participants in Jennings, Mellish, Tasker, Lamb and Golombok's United Kingdom study (2014). In a South African study by Potgieter (2003), black lesbian participants linked a prominent essentialist discourse with their belief in the importance of having children, as a woman's 'natural instinct', in contrast to the participants from the current research, who utilised the essentialist construction to set themselves apart from what they deemed as natural for other women. In doing so, they constructed procreation and motherhood as being natural and normative for heterosexual women, and positioned themselves as, therefore, unnatural and outside of this construct.

This essentialist view that women contain a natural universal instinct to procreate is problematic for a number of reasons. When motherhood is defined as 'natural,' non-motherhood becomes considered 'unnatural' and 'unwomanly' (Rich et al., 2011) and implies that women who are not mothers are not real women (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). It privileges motherhood as an identity and societal role and reinforces the importance of having biological children (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000), a standard which lesbian couples cannot attain. The focus on maternal instinct, constructing desire for children as an uncontrollable biological drive or as the result of overwhelming social pressures, denies and obscures women's agency when their decisions regarding children are constructed as being controlled by forces beyond their control (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000). Within a feminist theoretical framework, nothing about women's reproductive bodies is considered 'natural' but instead socio-historically specific, normative and constructed (Malson & Swann, 2003).

The women expressed an awareness of the expectations society place on women to be maternal. They, therefore, tended to consciously conceal their disinterest in children from other, usually heterosexual, women, believing that, even as gay women, they were expected to feel universally positive and nurturing about babies and children:

> *"It's so strange to be able to say it out loud…I have no motherly instincts. You can't be so honest about it, it's horrible, I'm just completely not interested." "It's a horrible—and I sound, I actually sound cold. And I think that's why I think about it all the time is because I come across as not liking [children]." "Why must I have and why is it so wrong that I don't want to have children?" "Because this is the first time— I've been able to be so open and honest…I don't tell anyone." "It's nice to be honest, it's nice. Versus trying to spare other people's feelings. Which, they really shouldn't have to be offended. Because it's my opinion versus theirs. It feels nice to be so honest."*

The majority of these lesbian couples spent little time discussing whether or not to have children, and most had never even considered the option of having children. It was, therefore, less a decision for the couple to make, and more a case of two childfree-minded people getting together and continuing childfree. However, in this voice, participants speak of feeling transient pressure from their parents to have children, to continue the family line and to experience motherhood:

> *"My mom would have loved for me to have had a child…have a child, yes of my own. Your mom, I think, would also have loved for you to also have had a child of your own." "My parents, they really wanted us to have children. So besides being gay, they were fully, fully supportive." "They would say, 'Come on, you've got to have a baby, you've got to have a baby, we're going to be here, we want to be grandparents.'"*

Conversely, most participants' parents actively supported and encouraged their childfree status. Some parents' support stemmed from the acknowledgement that their daughters had an opportunity to lead different lives, to experience the freedom and opportunities that perhaps the parents had not. As one participant's father said, "Kids are not all they're cracked up to be. Kids are, they're overrated". Other parents' feelings were related to the daughters' sexual orientation. Unlike research completed in Israel and the United Kingdom

(Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Dunne, 2000) these parents did not encourage motherhood as a way for their daughters to gain access to mainstream lives, and instead, they actively discouraged the participants from having children. A participant, referring to her mother, said:

> *"My mom and I have spoken about it quite a few times. She..., although she loves kids and grandkids, she's never said that she thinks I should have kids. She's always cautioned against doing it. I think if we decided to have kids, they'd be supportive. But I don't think she actively thinks it's a good idea. I think she thinks, 'It would probably be hard for them' and all those other complexities."*

While participants' parents had all accepted their daughter's sexual orientation, some participants felt that accepting children was a step too far for their parents. One mother's opinion was described as, "Quite happy to tell them that you're gay, but not to bring a baby into it," and another, "But pre-coming out, it was always, my parents expected me to have kids. 'You're going to get married and have children.' And after being gay and marrying, they said, 'Oh well, let's move on.'" Unlike research conducted by Maher and Saugeres (2007) which explored how dominant discourses of mothering influenced women in their life decisions about children, the participants in this study did not relate their perceived lack of maternal feelings to problematic relationships with their parents. Maher and Saugeres (2007) also found that some women related being put off having children after taking care of younger siblings, which was raised by a few of the participants here. One of these women described her experience of taking care of younger siblings:

> *"So that was a big turn off for me. I ended up being the second parent. When my mom went to work, when she went out. So I had my full of looking after kids. So I think that might be a factor for me. Because like, I learnt what it's like to take responsibility at a very early age. And I realised, 'I don't want this.'"*

This voice of No Maternal Instinct emphasises the participants' explicit lack of desire for a child, their outspoken preference for the freedom to focus time and resources on other pursuits, namely their careers, work, and travel, as well as an avoidance of what was described as the limitations of a child, the fear of losing out on certain freedoms. This voice echoes the freedom motivation and sacrifice concerns reported by childfree women in previous studies (Doyle et al., 2013; Peterson, 2015; Shaw, 2011). Participants believed

that they would have to make many sacrifices if they become mothers, and reflected on this sense of loss in the following excerpt:

> *"Children will take a lot away from what we have and, a place where you would be restricted, or you wouldn't be able to do everything, they're limiting, it's about their dream, so it's not about your dreams anymore, your joint dream is actually their dream, how you're going to then make their dreams then come true. So it stops, or puts a pause, on what you possibly want for yourself. And becomes about them." "The downside of having children is that we'd lose our freedom. We do have freedom, we've got opportunity, we don't have limitations. We want to travel. With children, you—it would be limited." "We go on holidays a lot. We—and that has a lot to do with our choice of not having kids. Freedom, we have such a happy life, I think very happy. I want us to travel; we love our home." "Freedom, you know, to be able to do what you want and not be—have to look after the little ones." "We've got the freedom to do whatever we want, whenever we want."*

For those few participants who were comfortable with the idea of conceiving a child and being pregnant, or others who had at some point been open to the idea of raising a child, the pathway to doing so felt like a daunting and impassable one, as discussed in the next voice.

5.2.2. Obstacles

As lesbian couples, deciding to have a child requires a lot more planning and consideration than heterosexual couples, with the weighing of pros and cons, an additional financial commitment, and a multitude of decision making. Adoption versus conception, means of conception, anonymous or known sperm donor, who will be the biological mother and carry the baby? The decision to have a child is just the beginning, which then requires ongoing decisions and proactive measures. All of these decisions and steps are described in this voice as obstacles which would need to be overcome, requiring a particularly strong desire for a child, as well as focused, proactive behaviour. The option to have a child cannot be "left to chance," or a "let's just see what happens" approach, as participants often perceived it to be with heterosexual couples. This view of the ease with which heterosexual women have children, further adds to the participants' construction of motherhood as something driven by intrinsic forces which come easily to those who have it. While for those who do

not, such as themselves, the path to motherhood becomes increasingly obstacle-laden. This Obstacles voice emphasises the practical difficulties which need to be overcome and the many decisions that a lesbian couple would have to make to have a child. It also highlights the very clinical, practical nature of the process, and the participant's awareness thereof:

> *"You have to think everything through; it becomes so academic. The pros, the cons, and I think for me it's a major deterrent. Or an obstacle." "You have to think everything through. You have to plan it; we have to go to the clinic—who's going to be the donor? When's it going to happen, are we ready, what about money". "I think it's a really obstacle-laden course to get there. That's my opinion". "We don't get to just make a decision. We have to make the decision, research, we have to put finance behind it, we have to do a cost analysis on the process, we have to look at timings, um, there was no physical enjoyment for either of us… It's not born out of love." "And with us, you have to really plan it, and it has to be this decision because you actually have to go for in vitro."*

This kind of conscious process was referred to by one participant as "the most planned parenting you can do." The need for a clinical decision-making process articulated by the participants in this study echoes previous studies (Riskind et al., 2013; Wall, 2011, 2013) which found that the multiple paths to parenthood available and the costs involved were often overwhelming for lesbians considering motherhood, and affected the parenthood decisions. This obstacle-laden path is unique to gay couples, (and to some degree heterosexual couples dealing with infertility) and the participants had given thought to the many decisions they would have to make, should they have chosen to have children. However, unlike Wall's (2013) findings with a global sample of three hundred and ninety-seven lesbians, participants in this study did not see being a lesbian mother as an obstacle in its own right, as they had not felt a sense of inadequacy or incapacity as a mother as a result of their sexual orientation, and they recognised the legal support for gay parenting provided by the South African context. Support which lesbian mothers in many other countries do not have available to them. The participants in this study perceived the obstacles as more individual and practical, and not based on legal complications as a result of their lesbian status in society.

For the participants who had perhaps initially been open to having a child, the prospect of negotiating this obstacle-laden path became a deterrent before they had even begun.

However, for the majority of participants, the seemingly well-worn path for heterosexual women of partnership and marriage leading to motherhood, was a path they felt little inclination to follow.

5.2.3. An Alternative Path

This voice is explicit, known to the participants, and speaks to the prevailing norms of the participant's social context, that of white, middle-class, educated lesbians, situated in Cape Town, a large gay-friendly city. They are aware of their rights regarding gay marriage, adoption and fertility treatments, and support the protection of these rights afforded to the gay community by South African law. This Conscious Voice speaks assertively of choice, of alternative options, of freedom to live and act as they choose, in contrast to the mainstream heteronormative, pronatalist society in which they live. This Conscious Voice is outspoken, clear, and unambiguous. It openly states what it believes and is self-assured in its childfree status, as heard in this I-Poem taken from a participant describing their decision not to have a child:

> I just felt
> I mean
> I was like
> I don't want to do this
> I made the decision
> I don't want to have children
> I felt
> I might not
> I was to go
> I don't want children
> I went down this path
> I feel
> I was going
> I'm gay
> I don't have
> I was like
> I'm out.

For these research participants, being gay means facing and challenging existing mainstream constructs of sexuality, relationships, and family, which in turn allows for further questioning of what it means to be a woman and the accompanying expected desire for children. With the expectation of motherhood historically lowered for them, these lesbians felt that alternative paths are more readily available to them. Therefore, all participants voiced an awareness of being able to forge their own path, with regards to whether or not they would have children. This voice of An Alternative Path repeatedly used the metaphor of a journey and described heterosexual women as largely unquestioningly following

socially constructed steps, namely dating, engagement, marriage and having children as echoed in this excerpt from the voice of An Alternative Path:

> *"The steps to motherhood are not expected, as they are for straight couples." "Both my best friends left school, got married, had kids…very zombie-like." "It was the right thing to do. That's the sequence. And if you didn't, like your parents almost looked at you, like, there's something wrong with you, 'when are you going to get married?' I mean my mother had guys waiting in the lounge for me when I got home, you know, 'this is your date.' But this was the pressure. The pressure, it's like, 'whoa!' But it did feel that way. Like conditioned." "So this is what is set out for your life, as a woman, is you get married, and then you have kids, and you know, your husband is going to work."*

For the participant couples, the socially constructed norms that have traditionally defined a women's identity and prescribed her path, are no longer relevant and no longer a direct consequence of her reproductive capacity, but have rather become matters over which she has control. In this voice, the participants expressed an awareness that lesbians challenge gendered norms, as a result of bypassing the current expectation of the steps on a woman's path from dating to motherhood. For them, being a lesbian erases a women's normative path which the participants' view as leading to having a child:

> *"That, for me, it never made sense—there is no life that has been set up for you, from the day you come on this earth. So nothing is set in stone, and I didn't want to just believe that this is how it has to happen….But I also didn't want a life being set up by society for me, already... This was my path, and I knew that I wanted to go the other way." "I've already taken an alternative path; now I'm just choosing to make it even more alternative, and choose not to have children."*

While participants voiced their belief that they were free to choose an alternative path, a few had also experienced some of the same pressures to have children as their heterosexual counterparts. They saw their lives as now being seen in parallel to the heterosexual path, as described here:

> *"They expect the next step is children. It's exactly like the straights now. Just because you're gay doesn't mean now—they're expecting now that*

> *you're married the next step is also having a baby. 'Why did you get married if you're not going to? Have a baby…you got married so that you could have children?' 'When are you having children?' 'No, no, I'm not going to have children.' 'Then why did you get married?'… A straight pattern, what I like about that is that they are completely seeing it as our right. It's positive."*

She simultaneously sees the assumption of lesbian's marrying and then having children as both a positive and unwanted expectation. As their lives become less marginalised as a result of the overall increasing acceptance of homosexuality within their social context, some participants are beginning to feel the same pronatalist pressures and expectations as their heterosexual peers, especially those lesbian couples who have married, becoming more aligned to the conventional path in the eyes of their straight counterparts. With the increasing opportunities for lesbian couples to live lives more familiar and recognisable to heterosexuals, come increasing pressures to adhere to their heteronormative standards.

The following section describes the second major voice, the contrapuntal Covert Voice, and shows how it is composed of the minor voices of Unnatural, If I Could Have I Would Have and Inequality.

5.3. Covert Voice

The participants, as lesbian couples living in South African, have a strong Conscious Voice which advocates for their beliefs. That voice is comfortable with asserting their belief that they lack a maternal instinct, their option to lead an alternative life and to avoid an obstacle-laden path. However, there is another major voice, contrapuntal to the first, which is the Covert voice. This voice is more subversive, less explicit, unfamiliar and less consciously known to the participants. This voice expresses their uncertainty with differences, their reverting to mainstream norms, and the return to narratives of their upbringing. This voice is softer, more hesitant, less self-assured, and sometimes surprises or even shocks itself. This Covert voice contains judgement and echoes many of the more heteronormative views of the current mainstream social constructions of motherhood and family. This second major voice is made up of the minor voices discussed below.

5.3.1. Unnatural

The Unnatural voice reflects the conflicts felt by the participants regarding lesbian couples conceiving and raising children. Participants focused on the impossibility of two women 'naturally' conceiving a child together, and also that there was no 'union,' no way to have a biologically shared child or a child 'born of passion and love':

> *"I think maybe it's the clinicalism of it and, um, also, I don't want to use the word religious, it's not—I don't like that word, but I feel that, if you think about creation and what having sex does, that aspect for me is missing when it comes to my situation. Like I said, I don't judge those who do, I think it's great, um, but in our situation, unless there were some.., thing, ja, it's about creation, I guess. Um, when I say it's not natural". "It is not born out of love." "I think it's a belief, I think our general belief is that as gay women, we can't—it's not, it's not a natural procedure to, you know, go through…if you can't have a child naturally". "It's the fact that it's impossible, biologically, to have a shared child."* **"***I think if biologically we could have kids it would be more like, you know, you had a glass of wine, 'Okay well, let's not use protection,' in the moment of, you know, passion, and it happens." "I think the amazing thing about having kids is the kind of union of two, of the two of you genetically. I think that's the most beautiful, incredible thing. And that's not possible." "Like I say, if you—it should be natural. I fully, totally believe...So it pushes you into all these choices that you have to make in life, and it's not the natural progression." "I think gays should be adopting actually; they shouldn't be creating." "If it's not going to happen naturally, then I don't think we would go there."*

In highlighting the impossibility of a natural conception, the decision to have a child was described as ultimately falling on the woman who would physically be carrying the child, rather than a decision for the couple to make together, as expressed by the following participant:

> *"I'm very clear that this is my decision." "I decide, not we, because 'we' can't decide to have a child together."*

The biological impossibility of two women having a child together raised additional concerns regarding the non-biological mother and how the child would perceive them, and what the exact nature of their role would be. This potential for maternal jealousy regarding the unequal biological ties to the child of the non-biological mother, and the uncertainty over their role, postpartum, has been highlighted in studies by Pelka (2009) and McKelvey (2014). This uncertainty can be heard in the following extract, where participants believe that there can only be one mother:

> *"There's no, you know, DNA from both of you." 'I had the child; the child is, therefore, mine'. Never mind we've been in a relationship for fifteen years or whatever. 'I had the child; the child is mine.'" "I have seen where it sort of backfired on couples; the child would, would regard the mother figure higher."*

Most participants also voiced a strong belief that there needed to be a father figure for the child. Participants spoke of this as something they felt strongly about but believed that it could not be expressed publicly, especially amongst other lesbians, where it would be negatively received. They shared their belief that ideally, parents should consist of a balance between male and female influences, therefore necessitating a male role model for the benefit of the child's experience of gender differences as well as the knowledge each gender imparts. Participants share the multitude of beliefs around the importance of a father figure in this excerpt from the Unnatural voice, which focuses on their views of the necessity and naturalness of a father figure:

> *"But I believe a child has a right to a father. The balance of nature is the yin and the yang; it is the masculine with the feminine. And we've got to get our masculine balance somewhere. I've always felt that that's almost a child's basic right. And I think that's a controversial topic to unwrap, in a group of lesbians. You don't say 'what about their right to a father?' I think that that could be—create some, you know, and that's my opinion. That would be quite badly received." "To me, it's still the lack of the father." "I feel very strongly about a father figure in the household. Very, very strongly". "So I'm very big on a father figure, for balance." "Who is the dad? Who is actually going to be a father figure to the kid? It's so important, it really is." "I've always had the belief that a kid needs to have a paternal and a maternal figure in their life. Like even if you're in a homosexual relationship, there has to be a paternal influence. Like there's*

> *got to be a man. There's got to be a man somewhere in the kid's life the kid can go to, and the kid can learn that. Like what men teach kids, you know. And like what women teach kids. And I firmly, firmly believe that. There's definitely got to be those, those…both sex influences ja, I think for a well-adjusted kid. I think for a well-balanced kid". "I mean those are physiological differences, and, and people act differently because of those. You know, we don't have the same hormones as men running through our bodies, or the same quantities of, there are very, very, very, very apparent differences." "I mean say for instance like you have two, two—a lesbian couple that have a little boy, you know. You don't know what it's like to be a boy. So if you don't have somebody who's got, you know, a close parent or a brother or a father figure, somewhere, what's that little boy going to do when he starts asking questions? You know, about stuff, and you don't know how to answer those questions because you've never been through it." "When I see lesbian couples adopting a kid or something I'm like, 'Cool. Who's the, who's going to— who is the dad? Not in the couple, but who is actually going to be a father figure to the kid?' It's so important, it really is."*

They construct families as consisting of two biological parents, a mother and father, who conceive a child as a result of heterosexual sex. Parenting roles are separated along gendered lines where daughters learn to be women from their mothers, and sons learn to be men from their fathers. Although participants spoke of the necessity of a father figure as something they felt strongly about, they were also aware that these views were 'controversial' and 'gender stereotyping.' These views could therefore not be expressed publicly, especially amongst other lesbians, where they would be negatively received. They seemed to struggle in the interviews with the articulation of these apparent contradictions as reflected in the hesitancy and uncertainty reflected in this following I-Poem:

I mean
I don't know
I've always
I don't tell very many people
I have a
I don't tell lesbians
I believe a child has a right to a father
I really believe that
I don't know if
I don't know how fair
I've always felt that
I think that's a controversial topic

Additionally, in another participant's I-Poem:

I'm not so sure
I contradict myself
I do think
I mean
I know
I always said
I'm not sure
I would handle a girl
I'm not saying it's wrong
I am gender stereotyping
I think
I think
I don't know
I don't even know how to explain it
I don't think
I'm not saying
I understand them
I think that's quite a tough one
I mean if there is
I think that could be quite a thing

The repeated use of the words "I think", "I don't know", and "I'm not saying" highlight the hesitancy in the participants when speaking about what they feel is a controversial issue. Participants spoke of their experiences of growing up with and learning from their fathers and seeing significant interactions between their fathers and brothers:

> *"You learn different things from, round men than you do around women." "A mom of the kid is going to teach something very different than the dad's going to teach something. And you learn about, it, sexes. Like you learn, how do men behave, how do women behave?" "I've grown up with my father, my brothers, I've grown up with boys, and I think what if they want to go and have an 'open air' and stuff?...I mean a wee outside….and I think, I think I want my boy to be around other men as well."*

In family situations where there hadn't been a stable father figure growing up, it was described as a loss, to the detriment of sons in particular, and something to be avoided:

> *"If he (brother) had had a father figure, a long-standing father figure, he might not be as, have as hard a time as he has now."*

They were implicitly aware of how their upbringing within a heterosexual household had affected how they construct a family, and how they perceive gay couples having children:

> *"I was surrounded by; this is what a family unit should look like. I suppose those were the examples that were there for you. That's what my idea is of what is supposedly acceptable, then, and a family, then I suppose it should, and it would have an effect on what my perception is of a gay couple having kids." "I think, I think there's a big fairy tale around having a family. I think, I promise you, it's this whole society thing. Mommy-daddy, mommy-daddy, family, children, you grow up together, you have kids, Christmas day….As a young girl growing up to sort of sixteen, I think, I think only because that was what was drummed into me. Because we grew up a family, with big families, we just grew up with mom, dad, families, kids, children. We just grew up like that". "I would always look at a family unit—I mean I always looked at [friend] and his wife and child—as the perfect family. 'Oh wow, look at that perfect family'. You know there's mother, father and one kid, happy".*

Lesbians who remain childfree, remain defined by their marginal lesbian identities, which, for these participants, provided a clear sense of self, as reflected in the Conscious voice, but without being able to imagine parenthood and how that would look for them. Having grown up in heterosexual households, in a society where a mother and father with biological children is still very much the norm, the participants have absorbed this construction of family as their own. They were surrounded by images of other families like theirs, who, while different in other ways, all resembled a construct of the heterosexual household. Participants spoke of the 'family unit' they imagined, and how they imagined this compared with raising a child in a lesbian-headed household:

> *"But in terms of the family unit kind of thing…everything is, ugh, about family values. You know you've got your little family unit, this is how it's supposed to be, you're almost not allowing that child, what would that child have been like if they were brought up in a socially acceptable norm household so that they get to develop just who they were supposed to have been. Versus now they've got this kind of other dynamic to work with which they didn't choose".*

They understood their imagined family unit as being something entirely different, a household outside of the 'socially acceptable norm' in which they would not be allowing their child a normal upbringing. They return to their known experiences and struggle to construct a different version of family. The participant's voices suggest that rather than a straightforward list of reasons as to why they choose not to have children, there is instead a more complex interplay of contradictory voices. A theme throughout the interviews is one of ambivalence, of experiencing both marginal and mainstream narratives and being challenged by interactions between the two.

When thinking about two women raising a child together, some participants voiced concern about it being "too much difference," particularly with couples considering adoption. If a gay relationship is perceived as different, and having two mothers is different, and being adopted is different, and the likelihood is that the adopted child will be from a different racial group than the adoptive parents, what is the impact of all this difference on the child? There was a concern that there is too much difference, and even if none of it matters to the couple, their concern for the potential negative experiences of the child overwhelms the desire to have a child. This Unnatural voice displays concern for how different this imagined family would be from their family of origin and wonders how it would impact on a child:

> *"I felt that being in a relationship with another woman plus having like a little black baby or a coloured baby would be too much difference for that child." "Adopted, and same-sex parents, and a different race." "You adopt a kid or have a kid, and now it's got to deal with adoption, same-sex you know marriage or whatever, and all of its own issues."*

This Unnatural voice contains the participant's conflicts, their hesitancies, their contradictions. It feels whispered, almost with a sense of reluctance, a confession. The certainty of beliefs expressed in the Conscious voice is undermined and contradicted by this Unnatural voice, which reverts to more mainstream ideas of family construction, the traditional image of the nuclear family with a mother and father and their biological offspring. The participants express many of the same concerns regarding having children raised by lesbian mothers in previous research. Namely, concerns about sperm donor identity, the role of the biological father, how their child would be perceived by others, growing up in a 'different' family, how they might be impacted as a result of having two mothers, and how the non-biological 'other' mother's role would develop (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Hayman, Wilkes, Halcomb, & Jackson, 2015). In the next minor voice, the participants consider

whether being heterosexual would have altered their childfree status, and highlight the inevitability of parenthood experienced by heterosexuals.

5.3.2. If I Could Have, I Would Have

Most participants agreed that if they had been straight, they would have had a child, "because that's what society says." This voice often sounded shocked as participants realised that they most likely would have had a child if their partner were male, that they simply would not have questioned motherhood. It would have been expected, the normative path and they would not have given the decision as much consideration; they would not have thought that choosing to be childfree was possible. Being heterosexual would mean that sex could lead to pregnancy, without the necessity of a third party, and a father figure would be available, thereby removing many of the obstacles and concerns highlighted by the Conscious voice. This voice also acknowledges the assumptions made regarding heterosexual women having children and highlights the pressure which a pronatalist society places on women to do so. The If I Could Have, I Would Have voice sounds startled by its own admissions, as participants imagined being in a heterosexual relationship and realised that motherhood would have seemed inevitable:

> *"But that's so hectic actually. Because if you were a bloke, we would have had kids. Because that's what society says. Society would have been a big pressure. We probably would have just tried and tried, ja. But you know, isn't that quite sad? What if you get straight couples who don't want to have kids, but society—I bet you straight couples, I bet people say to them, 'when are you going to have children?'" "Yeah, we would have had kids. That's hectic actually, if you were a guy we would definitely have had kids. No, but that's the reality." "If I were married to a guy, I would have children. I still think that." "I think if I were straight it would be a very different, a lot of pressure. I might be, I might be. And it might seem absolutely insane to say that looking at me now, but I could very well have gone that path. And the pressure might have become, 'I need to have', the husband might say, 'I want a boy,' you know, 'give me a boy, carry on the name.' And that probably would be the conversation." "I think if we were able to naturally, have a child, together, there's no doubt in my mind I definitely would. I think we'd have a child."*

They recognised the pressure of expectation placed on heterosexual women to have children, and the almost inevitability of children in heterosexual relationships. More importantly, they acknowledged that they would not have been immune to this pressure, and would most likely have followed the same pre-ordained path set out for them, which they had so confidently detoured from when talking about an Alternative Path. The participants acknowledged that, given the opportunity to conceive a child within a hypothetical heterosexual relationship, they would most likely have done so. This suggests that their stated lack of maternal instinct is less about biology and more about context. This fluidity of maternal instinct speaks to a feminist social constructionist view, where maternal instinct is not universal, but rather constructed through social discourses. These lesbians construct motherhood as natural and normal for heterosexual women, in relationships which provide a father figure, where sex leads to procreation and a child is "born of love." Once the discourse of unnatural lesbian motherhood is removed, and the participant imagines finding themselves in a heterosexual relationship, the expected maternal instinct is presumed to be forthcoming.

Many of the interview participants voiced a shared desire for all heterosexual couples to take greater consideration when deciding whether or not to have children, to realise that there is an alternative to the pressure of pronatalism. The participants expressed a desire to see this "natural next step" for heterosexual couples of having children, challenged and deconstructed, and not simply considered as the norm:

> *"I feel sorry for straight people that are forced into having…that's their natural next step. I feel sorry because, there's a lot of damaged people in our society, because of being raised by people that didn't want to actually have children. And actually, shouldn't have had children. Because for straight people it's the natural next step. Of, 'okay, that's what we're expected to do.' "That assumption of the next step, it's something that should be really torn into and broken down. Because that's dangerous. Because it's not normal, it's not the norm. It's not the next time. 'Oh you got married, so when are the kids?'"*

A few participants also expressed a desire for the motherhood decision to be made for them, to be able to bypass the obstacle-laden course through the arrival of a 'miracle baby.' To have a child as a lesbian couple requires a strong motivation to do so, to take proactive steps to overcome all the obstacles. The feeling was that if minimal consideration needed

to be given to the decision, and the barriers were removed, some of the participants would then be willing and positive about raising a baby:

> *"Look, I mean if it miraculously happened now, we are in a better situation. Now I would be okay. I mean let's say one of us became Maria, and a baby just appears in our stomach—Now I'd be okay with it." "If it was meant to be, then somewhere along the line some tiny little baby is going to cross our paths and maybe be left at our front door. And we keep it, you know. If a child ever crossed our paths, that needed a home or whatever, we would be the first people to take it in. For sure."*

While there were participants who did not want children under any circumstance, as described as part of the Conscious voice, other participants questioned whether their reluctance to have a child was more a result of not wanting to raise a child as a gay couple, rather than not wanting to have a child at all. As a result of the strong feelings expressed through the Unnatural voice, regarding the perceived unnaturalness of gay women having and raising children, the necessity of a father, and the many differences the child would face, some participants spoke of this uncertainty towards having a child as a gay woman, rather than the child itself:

> *"I don't know if the idea of having kids in the gay environment is what I'm actually against, versus having the actual children."*

The certainty of not wanting children was, therefore, undermined for those participants who realised that their desire to be childfree was less about not wanting a child and more about not wanting to have a child in the context of a lesbian relationship. The participants all expressed an awareness of living in what was described as a "social bubble"; a social context of relative immunity from the homophobia and more conservative views held by communities in less liberal, less urban, less gay-friendly areas. Their outspoken views and sense of being free to challenge heteronormative standards were mediated by their social context and the participants' identities as white, English, middle to upper-class lesbians who come from largely liberal, supportive families. While they are free to live openly and assertively in their "social bubble", they are also aware of what is outside that bubble; the less accepting, more traditional views, as expressed in their Covert voices:

> *"It's a very small minority of people, I think, and we're in it. Where it's accepted and we still, we still fight against the norms of tradition, for our*

beliefs and the freedoms that should just be accepted, we still fight for it. Even in our minority. Even though all the laws and legalities and everything say it's fine, but it's not, because culturally and traditionally it's not….it's here literally within the suburbs and the CBD… I mean Cape Town is really, if you want to call it, the gay capital of South Africa. But it's not Cape Town, it goes into a whole political thing as well where we don't see, even as us, we don't actually see Cape Town and what it is, what the Western Province is. It's so segregated. It's terrible. It's so against the norms of our traditions and our culture, even though it's completely legal and we can get married and have kids. What an ideal thing. But it's not that easy".

5.3.3. Inequality

As childfree lesbian couples, the participants experience greater homogeneity and equality in their relationships than that of heterosexual couples, specifically regarding the division of labour and gender roles (Kurdek, 2005; Matthews et al., 2002; Rothblum, 2009). When thinking about children, participants voiced a concern that if they were to take on the roles of mother and non-biological 'other' mother, they would risk falling into the more heteronormative, traditional parenting roles, with the biological mother taking on greater responsibility, at least initially, and the other mother feeling less involved and a reduced sense of responsibility. This voice of Inequality contained concern and fear, over both a loss of freedom for the biological mother and a fear of becoming a passive parent for the 'other' mother, resulting in the couple shifting into more traditional mother-father roles. This voice reflected fear of this change, which the couples viewed as creating inequality:

"I don't know if it is a horrible thought, but I, if I had a child, I automatically fall more into the mother role. I know we would both be mothers, but, if I look at [friend] and [friend] or [friend] and [friend], it has put them in roles" "I think when there's a child, it starts to create a mother, a masculine and a feminine role, and they slide into dad or mom role." "The one that carried it obviously falls into mom role. 'Ah, I'm going to play a round of golf and have beers with the girls afterwards,' while mom sits at home with the child, you know, and then the other one goes and completely falls into like a man role."

When distilling the I-Poem out of this voice of Inequality, where a participant imagines how a child could affect their relationship, there is a sense of inevitability to this shift in roles, which would be unbearable. This risk of falling into prescribed roles works as a further deterrent to motherhood:

I would be the one
You go to work
I do, but then
I'd have to go
I'd have to bath it
I would
I would have to
I'd be stuck
I work hard enough
Imagine if I had to
I have
I couldn't bear the thought
I think it's that
I think
I think about it all the time
I really feel like
I don't want children

Similar to Malmquist's (2015) findings, my participants also described the potential birth mother and other mother in gendered terms, drawing on a discourse of heteronormative heterosexuality. Having a close relationship with the child is explained as crucial to being a *mother*, rather than to any parent. Within the voice of Inequality, talking about different parental roles is related to an imbalance in power, where the non-birth mother is described as the less important participant, regardless of whether she is viewed as a 'passive parent' or as 'dad role'. Being the other mother to the child is characterised as a paternity role and being a primary caregiver as a maternity role (Malmquist, 2015). Not giving birth is heteronormatively intertwined with the male gender, resulting in a gendered construction of parenting roles. This essentialist position is a cultural belief that real motherhood is grounded in the bodily experience of pregnancy (Zamperini et al., 2016), leaving the other mother to be considered as lesser than the biological mother.

All the participants worked full time, either employed by others or running their own business. All placed importance on their careers, and for many, the idea of becoming either a stay-at-home, full-time mother or side-lined co-parent was a deterrent. The Inequality voice heard within the Covert voice reflects underlying concerns with the construct of an alternative family unit and reveals the participant's uncertainty regarding the impact children would have on their relationship and imagined parenting roles.

Two distinct major contrapuntal voices were identified within the participants' stories: the dominant, confident, outspoken Conscious Voice which declares the participants' public beliefs and feelings, and the private, more confessional Covert voice. The analysis found underlying contradictions between the participants' Conscious and Covert voices reflecting the contradictions in their personal lives, as well as within the societal context in which they conduct their public lives. In the following chapter I will discuss the findings presented above, and present the recommendations for future research and limitations of the study.

Chapter 6: Discussion, recommendations and limitations

6.1. Introduction

In this final chapter the findings from the present research, the recommendations for future research and limitations of the study will be discussed. As highlighted by Forrest, Nikodemos and Gilligan (2016), the Listening Guide method “deliberately focuses on exploration and opening rather than driving toward a conclusion" (p. 64). It would therefore be presumptuous, on the basis of this exploration, to make conclusions as to why these lesbian couples are childfree. However, the participants in this study provide a greater understanding of how childfree lesbian couples construct their childfree status.

6.2. Discussion

The data analysis presented in Chapter 5 identified two contrapuntal voices; one conscious and assured, the other covert and hesitant. The conscious voice conveys a lack of desire for a child and the practical barriers lesbian couples need to overcome in order to have a child, findings which echo prior research (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Riskind et al., 2013). However, the covert voice suggests that, for these women, their childfree status is less about choosing not to have children and more about struggling to construct a lesbian motherhood alternative to the perceived ideal of heteronormative parenting in South Africa. Significantly, despite asserting self-aware lesbian identities, their constructs of motherhood and parenting are still strongly influenced by heteronormative discourses and a pronatalist context, as evidenced in the participant voices. These findings suggest that in order to deepen our understanding of childfree lesbian couples, we need to focus on the specific social and relationship contexts in which they are compelled to create meaning and make sense of their lives.

6.2.1. Continuing hegemony of the heteronormative family

Firstly, a construct of the heteronormative family as normative and socially valued is identified as exercising a powerful influence on participants’ constructions of family and parenting. This finding highlights that this heteronormative construct problematises lesbian motherhood and seems to challenge participants to integrate an acceptable and

comfortable version of lesbian motherhood. Despite South Africa's progressive constitution and legal support for same-sex relationships - including marriage and access to artificial reproduction technologies - for these couples, lesbian motherhood is associated with an 'unnatural' discourse, in both the biological and normative sense. This discourse of 'unnaturalness' has been identified by Vincent and Howell (2014) as a dominant strategy indirectly used to deny the idea of sexual equality in post-1994 South Africa. Family is constructed as a heteronormative ideal, consisting of a mother and father and their biological children. These lesbian participants position themselves as critical of the lack of autonomy implied in this discourse, commenting on the "zombie-like" nature of heterosexual couples.

The participants in this study voiced a strong desire for heterosexual couples to challenge and "tear down" the existing heteronormative construct of family creation – perceived, much like the bisexual South African female participant's in Lynch and Maree's (2013) research, as an unquestioned series of socially prescribed steps from marriage to parenthood. However, they were uncomfortable veering too far from their heteronormative constructs of family and overlooked the possibility that they could work to deconstruct the heteronormative model and create an acceptable alternative for themselves. This contradiction, with participants suggesting that straight couples should review their accepted family norms, while finding it challenging to recognise and interrogate their own assumptions (for example, the need for a father figure), is a result of participants growing up within a heteronormative family model. They are aware of how their upbringing within heterosexual households has affected how they construct family and their perception of same-sex couples having children. Furthermore, they are aware that not all traditional heteronormative families fit their romanticised descriptions, yet their voices reflected idealised notions of family, which they described as a normative expectation that cannot easily be questioned or resisted. Even those raised by single parents or adopted, still fit within what they recognise as an "acceptable family norm". Having grown up in families which reflect the society in which they were raised, the participants were surprised to realise that they struggle to envisage alternative constructs of motherhood and family for themselves. Unable to eliminate the need for a father figure or completely endorse two women raising sons, they revert to dominant discourses of what is natural and normal. They find themselves outside of the existing traditional constructs of 'natural' motherhood available to them, but without acceptable alternatives.

The participants' view of parenting requiring both male and female role models, due to their "inherent differences", indicates their adoption of essentialist discourses of gender.

Feminist social construction highlights that these gender categories we assign are not real. It would suggest that, rather than comparing themselves to a norm determined by heterosexual mothers and parents, they should create a new meaning of parenting from their own, potentially very different experiences, and consider them equally valid. Participant concerns regarding the transition into traditional gendered parenting roles, the need for a male parental figure, and the ideal of biological procreation, speak to the ways in which participants unconsciously express heteronormative notions of gender in their lives and relationships, findings echoed by Reygan and Lynette (2014) in a South African study conducted with young lesbians in Kwa-Zulu Natal.

South Africa is one of the few countries in the world to enshrine gay rights in its Constitution and was an early advocate for same-sex marriage, yet the realities on the ground for non-heterosexual people often do not reflect this (Vincent & Howell, 2014). The participants in this study acknowledge and appreciate these institutionalised rights for all same-sex couples, but are also aware of the ‘’social bubble’’ in which they live. Their awareness of the intersection between race, class and space - and its impact on the level of tolerance towards lesbians in South Africa - contradicts Gibson and Macleod’s (2012) study of South African lesbian identity in which the white lesbian student participants at Rhodes University remained silent in reference to their racialised and classed positions. Despite being in this mostly liberal, tolerant, supportive social context, participants still expressed concerns over a need to fight for their acceptance and beliefs, in opposition to the accepted heteronormative standards.

The emphasis on the unnaturalness of lesbian motherhood signifies that the experience of being childfree for these lesbians is driven, in part, by a difficulty in challenging existing mainstream constructs of motherhood and family, but also a difficulty in constructing lesbian motherhood as a viable option for themselves (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016). Unable to construct a lesbian motherhood which lives up to their ideals, and without an expected maternal desire to have a child, they lead childfree lives. They wish to be spontaneous, to pursue careers, to broaden and deepen other relationships, and to create identities that do not originate in motherhood. These women’s constructions of with remaining childfree can be seen both as strategies to deal with heterosexism and discrimination as well as a reflection of prevailing, heteronormative understandings of what constitutes a ‘family’ (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016). They lead lives which simultaneously aspire to and challenge heteronormative, pronatalist narratives and expectations of womanhood (Gotlib, 2016). The growing body of South African research exploring how lesbians navigate relationships and motherhood (Breshears & Lubbe-De Beer, 2016; Distiller, 2011; Lubbe, 2007; Potgieter,

2003; Van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017) signifies an increasing visibility of same-sex family compositions (Lynch & Maree, 2013). However, these challenges to heteronormativity, while perhaps leading to expanded definitions of 'family', have yet to succeed in claiming a plausible alternative. We need to be mindful of the additional challenges faced by same-sex couples, namely the social context in which they live and love, and their (perhaps largely unconscious) constructs of motherhood and family. We need to understand how and when lesbians are either internalising hegemonic, heteronormative discourses on the meaning of 'family' and 'motherhood' and/or self-consciously utilising dominant family discourses to sustain the decisions they have made around having children or remaining childfree (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016).

Secondly, the participants' construction of motherhood and maternal desire as a biological certainty for heterosexual women, reflects the pronatalist South African context in which they live. Pronatalism serves to enact and encourage cultural discourses of femininity, in which the act and desire to mother are regarded as central to what women do, and what women are (Gillespie, 2000, 2003). It is a view, shaped by political, social and economic discourses (Gotlib, 2016), that motherhood is naturally equated with womanhood, and that female identity cannot be extricated from its motherhood role (Gillespie, 2000; Hird & Abshoff, 2000). In so doing, motherhood becomes constructed as a fixed and natural practice that is central to feminine identity (Shapiro, 2014). These participants occupy a contradictory space, where lesbians are defined outside of pronatalist discourse, yet still reside in the same social world that expects women to become parents (Bergstrom-Lynch, 2016). Although the South African socio-cultural and political landscape is infused by a pronatalist ideology, not all women are encouraged to become mothers. Not because they have somehow escaped the pronatalist dogma, but rather because lesbians, in particular, are often deemed inappropriate to mother (Rich et al., 2011). They are then excluded from the status of desirable motherhood, and are either discouraged from becoming mothers, or, as mothers, are stigmatised and ridiculed for their irresponsible, selfish, or unacceptable actions (Hirsch, cited in Gotlib, 2016). This exclusion of certain women suggests a bias towards encouraging heterosexual motherhood, and the discouragement of particular women's reproductive choices indicates pronatalism's categorising of women into desirable and non-desirable mothers. In so doing, it not only constructs a discourse of "women-as-mother," but also "a particular-kind-of-woman-as-mother" (Gotlib, 2016, p. 344). As a result, pronatalism perpetuates heteronormative constructs of motherhood, separating women into categories predicated on the relative value of motherhood. While pronatalism results in childlessness being perceived as unnatural for most women, in contrast, for these lesbians, who have long been deemed socially unsuitable to mother (Hequembourg &

Farrell, 1999; Mezey, 2008a), childlessness may in fact be considered a more 'natural' and even desirable position (Rich et al., 2011).

Thirdly, a surprising finding for both researcher and participants was the acknowledgement by the majority of couples that, if were they in heterosexual relationships, they would most likely have children. They recognised that as heterosexuals, they would face strong societal pressure to procreate and that many of their reservations regarding motherhood within same-sex relationships would also be erased. This suggests that their stated lack of maternal instinct is less about biology and more about context. This fluidity of maternal instinct speaks to a feminist social constructionist view, where maternal instinct is not universal, but rather constructed through social discourses. These lesbians construct motherhood as natural and normal for heterosexual women, in relationships which provide a father figure, where sex leads to procreation and a child is "born of love." Once the discourse of unnatural lesbian motherhood is removed, and the participant imagines herself in a heterosexual relationship, the expected maternal instinct is presumed to be forthcoming. This further highlights the fact that, for these participants, unlike heterosexual childfree women, their childfree status is not solely about children and motherhood per se, but rather the specific context of motherhood. This finding is again related to the contradictory South African landscape, where the constitution provides legal support for same-sex families, yet society remains largely patriarchal and traditional, and the prevalent homosexuality discourse is one of homosexuality as unAfrican (Nkabinde & Morgan, 2005; Reid, 2010). Despite the participants' desire to challenge the current inevitability of having children within the context of heterosexual relationships, they admit that they, too, would accede to pronatalist expectations.

Lastly, in this research, lesbian couples did not feel free to speak openly about many of their feelings and opinions, for fear of judgement from others. They conceal their strong feelings from both their outgroup and in-group respectively, including their lack of desire for a child, which they conceal from other mothers and their belief in the need for a father figure, which they stay silent about when with other lesbians. From a feminist social constructionist standpoint, words shape our understanding of the world, and rather than objective observations, we use language to create meaning (Gergen, 2009). Language plays a key role "in the construction of that most privileged status of all, 'normality'" (Vincent & Howell, 2014, p. 475). As a result, our understanding of the world is open to challenge and reconstruction. Creating new meaning has to start with the conversations we have amongst ourselves. Therefore, these participants need to share what they believe with others and to talk about how they understand family, motherhood, and children. However,

as found in this research, lesbian couples are often aware of and silenced by what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable by surrounding society.

These women would only divulge certain views within the boundaries of confidentiality. This silencing of their opinions, beliefs, and feelings then prevents new meaning from being created. The challenge then becomes, how do they construct alternative forms of family; how do they reconstruct the role of a father or lesbian motherhood if they are not able to openly discuss the meaning these constructs hold for them? We can start by acknowledging these different voices, including them in our understanding of same-sex relationships and the specific challenges facing lesbian couples when contemplating planned families. Without providing space for the voices to be acknowledged and challenged, to foster the creation of new meanings, the prevailing constructs continue to remain unchallenged. This study illustrates the need, then, for greater exposure to alternative discourses of family and motherhood, in psychology and in broader society, in order to expand the possibilities for lesbian couples to participate in challenges to heteronormativity.

However, a review by Francis (2017a) of South African literature into gender and sexual diversity within schools and the educational curriculum found that gender and sexuality are constructed as heteronormative and heterosexual resulting in a prevailing, unquestioned and reinforced heteronormativity. From Life Orientation textbooks, where non-heterosexual lives are invisible (Potgieter & Reygan, 2012), to class interactions with teachers who believe homosexuality is unnatural (Francis, 2017b; Reygan & Francis, 2015), young people are faced with constructs of relationships and family that fit within the traditional norms, with little room for alternatives. Schools, as spaces where young people seek to construct, among others, their sexual and gender identities (Francis, 2017a) should, therefore, be a focus point for change. In addition, existing beliefs regarding the ideal heteronormative family construct could be challenged by increased awareness of relevant affirmative research literature, such as the role of a father figure in a child's life (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Clarke, 2006; Farr, Bruun, Doss, & Patterson, 2017).

Organisations providing support and services to the South African gay community, such as OUT (www.out.org.za), PFLAG South Africa (www.pflagsouthafrica.org) and Triangle Project (www.triangle.org.za), as well as gay community news and entertainment portals such as MambaOnline (www.mambaonline.co.za) could assist by making the most recent research in these areas available on their websites, as well as disseminating information via their training workshops, support groups and communication channels. While these

support organisations do provide some research, it is limited, sometimes dated, and often focused on hate crimes, bullying, sex, HIV, legal issues, or is only available on request. In addition, the organisations focus primarily on support and legal advocacy and pay less attention to the latest same-sex family research.

In psychology, it would be valuable for practitioners to be aware of the complex and at times contradictory discourses that inform lesbians' negotiation of heteronormative motherhood. When language shapes and creates our reality, but we do not hear the voices of those who would speak out against prevailing norms, reality cannot change. Therefore, space needs to be provided for lesbians (and other non-heterosexuals) to share their reservations, their beliefs and their feelings, without fear of judgement from others. While this study is a first step in making their voices heard, more needs to be done to amplify them, and to deconstruct how we speak about 'natural' and 'unnatural' forms of family.

In summary, this study's findings indicate that for lesbian couples, their childfree status cannot be understood without taking their specific same-sex relationship and social and cultural contexts into account. The construct of the South African heteronormative family as normative and socially valued is identified as exercising a powerful influence on participants' constructions of motherhood and family. In addition, their lesbian identity plays a determining role in their childfree status - as evidenced by their realisation that they would likely be mothers if they were in heterosexual relationships - and in their inability to construct an acceptable alternative to heterosexual motherhood. For lesbian couples then, motherhood is, in many ways, inconceivable.

6.3. Recommendations and limitations

6.3.1. Recommendations

Future research will benefit from exploring broader aspects of South African lesbian experience by including the voices of participants from more diverse socio-economic, cultural and racial categories as well as lesbian couples living in less liberal, urban areas. Additionally, it would be beneficial to gain insight into younger lesbians' constructs of motherhood and family. In the same way that previously 'deviant' mothers - such as single, working mothers - have become more acceptable and even normative as their numbers and corresponding visibility increased, perhaps increasing numbers of lesbian-headed families are changing the available constructs for those lesbians who have come of age during the 'gayby' boom.

6.3.2. Limitations and conclusion

While providing greater insight into South African childfree lesbian couples, this exploratory study has limitations, as outlined below.

Firstly, a significant drawback of this research is the lack of diversity among respondents. As explained in 4.3, white, middle-class, lesbian couples from Cape Town were selected as participants for this research. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalised to all South African lesbian couples. Rather, I tried to understand a relatively unexplored aspect of childfree lesbian couples within a specific context. Secondly, a snowball sampling method was utilised to access the participants. As a result, lesbians who were unknown to the initial participants and beyond their wider social networks were not included in the study. Undoubtedly a different sample of women, even if matching the participant criteria, could have resulted in distinctive voices in contrast to or agreement with those presented by the current participants. Thirdly, although there were good reasons for joint interviews, it could be argued to have limited the research as couple partners may have consciously and/or unconsciously edited their responses in the presence of their partners. Finally, while every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis and findings, the nature of qualitative research and a method such as the Listening Guide are such that different researchers may have focused on different voices or reached alternative conclusions. It is impossible to determine if or how the analysis and findings of a different researcher may have differed from those of this study.

As the researcher, I have to acknowledge the extent of my own expectations at the outset of the study. Like the participants, I am a childfree lesbian in a long-term relationship. Over the past few years, I have considered many of the same issues raised by these participants, and have been faced with some of the contradictions and challenges they have voiced. At the outset, I assumed that the findings would be similar to those already discussed in the literature regarding heterosexual childfree women, with the addition of the practical obstacles lesbians face in conceiving children, and decisions related to that process. A part of me was searching for clarity, but also for a sense of shared meaning. I was, therefore, somewhat surprised by the strong influence of the heteronormative construct of family, and the passionate feelings expressed by the participants in both challenging and reinforcing these constructs. At the completion of this study, I am left with a clearer sense of the complexities of motherhood for many lesbians, and a greater awareness of the ongoing influence of heteronormativity on how same-sex couples construct meaning in their lives.

This research set out to explore South African childfree lesbian couples, to contribute towards a more refined understanding of lesbian couples and the ways in which they challenge predominant assumptions of womanhood. It also set out to include the voices of childfree lesbians, thereby providing an understanding of a more diverse group of women who choose to opt out of motherhood. Further research in this area is needed, but this study has begun the process of including the experiences and voices of those who do not fit within the dominant heterosexual norms. The importance of this research is encapsulated by Calhoun (2000, p. 132), who states, “What is at stake is not the right to participate in a traditional form of family life but the right to define what counts as a family.”

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informed consent form

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STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Why lesbian couples choose to be childfree: an exploratory study

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Nicole Attridge, under the supervision of Dr Elmien Lesch, from the Department of Psychology at Stellenbosch University. Nicole is a Masters student in Psychology and the results of this research study will contribute towards her Master's thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a self-identified lesbian in a long-term committed relationship, living in an urban area within the Cape Town municipality, and have chosen to remain child-free.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to explore why South African lesbian couples in committed relationships choose not to have children at a time when the opportunities are available to them, and the South African context provides legal support for same-sex parenting.

2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

1. A time and place, convenient for you and your partner, will be chosen and agreed upon for the interview.
2. Nicole Attridge will then interview you and your partner together.
3. Initially, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire which contains questions regarding your background demographic information. Details such as your age, home language, socioeconomic status and relationship duration will be collected.
4. Once the questionnaire has been completed, you will be interviewed regarding your choice not to have children. This will be done in a conversational manner, and the interview should last approximately one hour.
5. After the joint interview, each participant will have the opportunity for a short individual interview to allow for you to say anything further which was perhaps not said during the joint interview.
6. The interview will be recorded for later transcription by the researcher, and you may ask for a copy of the transcribed interview if you wish.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The interview is of a personal nature regarding a topic that has the potential to raise difficult emotions and feelings. As such, if you feel that you would benefit from counselling or have any further need for assistance, please contact FAMSA on 021 447 0170 /447 7951 or request a counselling appointment via their online booking form here: http://www.famsawc.org.za/contact. They are a non-profit organisation specialising in relationship counselling and can provide a counselling service specifically focused on same-sex relationships. If you would prefer a private practitioner, a referral will be provided.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

While the benefit to you as an individual or couple may not be material, you may find it beneficial to have the opportunity to explore and reflect upon how you feel about being a childfree couple, why you have chosen this path and what it means to you.

From a research perspective, this study will contribute to our understanding of the ways in which lesbian couples are changing the dominant definitions of family, and exploring alternatives to mainstream expectations around motherhood and women's identity. You will, therefore, be contributing to the literature in this area and assisting researchers in describing and understanding this issue.

3. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

You will not receive payment for participating in this study.

4. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of the use of pseudonyms, which you will choose. These pseudonyms will be used throughout the transcripts and data analysis process, and any information which makes you personally identifiable will be removed.

Access to the interview transcripts will only be granted to the researcher and her supervisor, Dr Elmien Lesch. The data will be password protected, and once the research is completed and there is no further need for it, the transcripts and data will be destroyed.

In the event that any publications result from the research, your pseudonym will be used, and no personally identifying information will be provided or used in the material provided for publication.

The audio recordings of the interviews will be used to transcribe the interviews, which can be provided to you upon request. They will be available only to the researcher and her supervisor, and will be erased once no longer needed.

5. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. For example, if the participant declined to answer the majority of questions, thereby rendering the interview data unusable.

6. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Nicole Attridge at 19602030@sun.ac.za or Dr Elmien Lesch at el5@sun.ac.za or on 021-8083466.

7. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

The information above was described to me by Nicole Attridge, in English, and I am in command of this language or it was satisfactorily translated to me. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Subject/Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative **Date**

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____ [*name of the participant].* She was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in English and no translator was used.

_____ _____

Signature of Investigator **Date**

Appendix B: Interview schedule

1. Thank you for meeting with me. How are you feeling about being here today?
2. What is your understanding of the research question?
3. Please would you share with me how your relationship began?
4. What do children mean to you?
5. Many couples get married so they can start a family. However this wasn't the case for you. Can you tell me a bit about what motivated the two of you to make a commitment to each other?
6. How would you describe your relationship and lives since you came together as a couple?
7. Could you tell me when (if ever) and how the topic of having children came up in your relationship?
8. Have your families and friends, those around you, ever tried to influence you regarding the choice to have children? If so, could you tell me about it?
9. Did you ever consider and/or attempt ART (artificial reproductive technologies) before deciding not to have children?
10. What lead you to choose not to have children? What influenced the choice?
11. How do you think your relationship differs from other couples who have children?
12. What perceptions do you think people have of you, and what messages have you received as a couple that has chosen not to have children?
13. Many couples who have children often see having and raising children as their contribution to society. How do you see yourselves contributing to society?
14. How do you feel about same-sex couples having and raising children?
15. If you have religious/spiritual beliefs, could you describe them for me?
16. Many married couples talk about how being parents together has enriched and deepened their relationship. Given that you've chosen not to have children, what do you think has enriched and deepened your relationship over the years you've been together?
17. Many people define themselves, in part, by their children, e.g. “I’m a mother of two girls, ages 5 and 7...” How do you define yourselves?
18. If a couple you knew was struggling with the decision of whether or not to have children, and asked you for your advice or input, what would you say to them?
19. Could describe your life together as a couple without children?
20. Is there anything else you would like to share with me, or that you think I haven’t asked?

Appendix C: Ethics clearance

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Approved with Stipulations
New Application

03-Mar-2016
Attridge, Nicole N

Proposal #: **SU-HSD-001687**
Title: **Lesbian Couples Who Choose to be Childfree: An Exploratory Study**

Dear Miss Nicole Attridge,

Your **New Application** received on **27-Jan-2016**, was reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities) via Committee Review procedures on **25-Feb-2016**.

Please note the following information about your approved research proposal:

Proposal Approval Period: **25-Feb-2016 -24-Feb-2017**

Present Committee Members:
Frick, Liezel LB
De Villiers, Mare MRH
Theron, Carl CC
Viviers, Suzette S
Fouche, Magdalena MG
Hansen, Leonard LD
Nell, Theodore TA
Lambrechts, Derica D
Van Deventer, Karel KJ
De Klerk, Jeremias JJ
Graham, Clarissa CJ
Lesch, Anthea AM
Toi, Jerall J
Louw, Dirk DJ
Nel, Michelle M

The following stipulations are relevant to the approval of your project and must be adhered to:
The researcher may proceed with the envisaged research provided that the following stipulations, relevant to the approval of your project are adhered to or addressed. Some of these stipulations may

require your response [i.e. RESPONSE REQUIRED]. Where a response is required, you must respond to the REC within six (6) months of the date of this letter. Your approval would expire automatically should your response not be received by the REC within 6 months of the date of this letter.

If a response is required, please respond to the points raised in a separate cover letter titled "Response to REC stipulations" AND if requested, HIGHLIGHT or use the TRACK CHANGES function to indicate corrections / amendments of ATTACHED DOCUMENTATION, to allow rapid scrutiny and appraisal. Your response may be emailed to the REC Secretariat.

1) OVERVIEW

The researcher wishes to investigate what could be a fairly sensitive topic for some of the participants. As such the research is accurately classified as having 'medium' risk. The researcher is commended on the quality of her application. It is clear that she have given considerable thought to methodological and ethical considerations.

2) SCIENTIFIC VALIDITY /METHODOLOGY / RELEVANCE

Semi-structured couple and individual interviews will be conducted. Each couple will be interviewed, with both partners together, for approximately an hour, followed by a brief individual interview to allow for participants to say anything further which could not be said during the joint interview. Couples will be interviewed until data saturation has been achieved. The researcher will then use Carol Gilligan's Listening Guide Method to analyse the data. This method, which "facilitates psychological discovery", will allow the researcher to give a voice to South African lesbian couples who decide to remain child-free.

The researcher indicated that raw data "will be deleted and destroyed once it is no longer needed." The REC advises the researcher to only destroy data once all planned articles flowing from the research have been published.

3) PARTICIPANT SELECTION AND RECRUITMENT

The researcher will start her empirical research with lesbian couples in her own personal network. She has very specific selection criteria (self-identified lesbian couples living in Cape Town aged between 30 and 45 who are in a committed relationship and who have chosen to be child-free). Additional participants will be recruited via snowball sampling.

The researcher should be sensitive to the possibility of subtle coercion when approaching potential participants in her own network on contacts. There might be couples who feel that their friendship with the researcher might be in jeopardy should they refrain from participating in the research.

4) INFORMED CONSENT FORMS AND PROCESSES

The researcher acknowledges that the subject matter of the study is of a personal and potentially sensitive nature for some participants. As some respondents might thus experience psychological discomfort during or

after the interviews, the contact details of free follow-up advice, and/or counselling services (FAMSA) are provided as a precaution.

The informed consent form is generally adequate, however, it is suggested that a telephone number of a FAMSA contact person (if possible) is added instead of merely providing the website address for FAMSA. The researcher should try, as far as possible, to make counselling services more accessible to participants by way of providing direct contact information of a person who can assist with setting up an appointment rather than expecting the participant to navigate a website to access the information. [RESPONSE REQUIRED]

5) RISK LEVEL AND RISK /COST-BENEFIT ASSESSMENT [RECOMMENDATION ONLY – NO RESPONSE REQUIRED]

The risk/cost-benefit ratio of this study could be further improved. In the opening statement of the research proposal the researcher motivates the study on the basis of her own personal experience. She indicates that she is a lesbian in a long-term committed relationship who has often been confronted with the question as to why she does not have children (especially as lesbians in South Africa have the legal rights to do so and have increasing opportunities for motherhood).

The researcher further justifies the study on the basis of an identified gap in the literature. She consequently aims to "firstly, to understand and give voice to lesbian couples choosing not to have children. And secondly, to contribute towards a more refined understanding of the lives of lesbian couples and the ways in which they are separating femininity and motherhood and thereby opening new possibilities for female identity and challenging predominant assumptions of womanhood."

In the informed consent form, the researcher acknowledges that: "While there is a potential for negative impact on the participants, it might be balanced by possible benefits to participants. One potential benefit for participants is the opportunity to share and reflect on their experiences as a couple, which they may not have done before. Additionally, there is the benefit gained from a greater understanding of the reasons for same-sex women choosing not to have children, and the opportunity to include these women's voices in the literature".

Notwithstanding the benefits listed above, the REC would like to urge the researcher to consider the wider benefits of the study. For example: could the findings of this study empower psychologists, social workers and family counsellors to deliver a better service to lesbian couples who grapple with the decision of starting a family (or not). Are there any tangible "deliverables" to offset the potential emotional discomfort that some participants might experiences?

Please provide a letter of response to all the points raised IN ADDITION to HIGHLIGHTING or using the TRACK CHANGES function to indicate ALL the corrections/amendments of ALL DOCUMENTS clearly in order to allow rapid scrutiny and appraisal.

Please take note of the general Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

Please remember to use your **proposal number** (**SU-HSD-001687**) on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research proposal.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Also note that a progress report should be submitted to the Committee before the approval period has expired if a continuation is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki and the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number REC-050411-032.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research.

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at 0218089183.

Included Documents:

DESC Report

REC: Humanities New Application

Sincerely,

Clarissa Graham

REC Coordinator

Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)

Investigator Responsibilities

Protection of Human Research Participants

Some of the general responsibilities investigators have when conducting research involving human participants are listed below:

1. Conducting the Research. You are responsible for making sure that the research is conducted according to the REC approved research protocol. You are also responsible for the actions of all your co-investigators and research staff involved with this research. You must also ensure that the research is conducted within the standards of your field of research.

2. Participant Enrollment. You may not recruit or enroll participants prior to the REC approval date or after the expiration date of REC approval. All recruitment materials for any form of media must be approved by the REC prior to their use. If you need to recruit more participants than was noted in your REC approval letter, you must submit an amendment requesting an increase in the number of participants.

3. Informed Consent. You are responsible for obtaining and documenting effective informed consent using **only** the REC-approved consent documents, and for ensuring that no human participants are involved in research prior to obtaining their informed consent. Please give all participants copies of the signed informed consent documents. Keep the originals in your secured research files for at least five (5) years.

4. Continuing Review. The REC must review and approve all REC-approved research proposals at intervals appropriate to the degree of risk but not less than once per year. There is **no grace period.** Prior to the date on which the REC approval of the research expires, **it is your responsibility to submit the continuing review report in a timely fashion to ensure a lapse in REC approval does not occur.** If REC approval of your research lapses, you must stop new participant enrollment, and contact the REC office immediately.

5. Amendments and Changes. If you wish to amend or change any aspect of your research (such as research design, interventions or procedures, number of participants, participant population, informed consent document, instruments, surveys or recruiting material), you must submit the amendment to the REC for review using the current Amendment Form. You **may not initiate** any amendments or changes to your research without first obtaining written REC review and approval. The **only exception** is when it is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants and the REC should be immediately informed of this necessity.

6. Adverse or Unanticipated Events. Any serious adverse events, participant complaints, and all unanticipated problems that involve risks to participants or others, as well as any research related injuries, occurring at this institution or at other performance sites must be reported to Malene Fouch within **five (5) days** of discovery of the incident. You must also report any instances of serious or continuing problems, or non-compliance with the RECs requirements for protecting human research participants. The only exception to this policy is that the death of a research participant must be reported in accordance with the Stellenbosch Universtiy Research Ethics Committee Standard Operating Procedures. All reportable events should be submitted to the REC using the Serious Adverse Event Report Form.

7. Research Record Keeping. You must keep the following research related records, at a minimum, in a secure location for a minimum of five years: the REC approved research proposal and all amendments; all informed consent documents; recruiting materials; continuing review reports; adverse or unanticipated events; and all correspondence from the REC.

8. **Provision of Counselling or emergency support.** When a dedicated counsellor or psychologist provides support to a participant without prior REC review and approval, to the extent permitted by law, such activities will not be recognised as research nor the data used in support of research. Such cases should be indicated in the progress report or final report.

9. **Final reports.** When you have completed (no further participant enrollment, interactions, interventions or data analysis) or stopped work on your research, you must submit a Final Report to the REC.

10. **On-Site Evaluations, Inspections, or Audits**. If you are notified that your research will be reviewed or audited by the sponsor or any other external agency or any internal group, you must inform the REC immediately of the impending audit/evaluation.

Appendix D: Demographic questionnaire

1. What is your date of birth: dd/mm/yyyy_____

2. Which race group do you belong to?

    a. Black
    b. White
    c. Coloured
    d. Other (please specify): _____

3. What is your home language?
    a. English
    b. Afrikaans
    c. isiXhosa
    d. Other (please specify): _____

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed? (select)
    a. High School
    b. Diploma
    c. Bachelor's Degree
    d. Post-Graduate Degree

5. What is your employment status? (select)

    a. Employed full time
    b. Employed part-time
    c. Self employed
    d. Unemployed

6. Gross annual income level: (select)

    a. 0-R50,000
    b. R50,001 – R150,000
    c. R150, 001 – R200, 000
    d. R200, 001+
    e. I would prefer not to say

How many years have you been in your current relationship?_____

Appendix E: A working sample of Step 2 "I-Poems"

Example of an excerpt from a participant interview transcript: all personal pronouns and the accompanying verb phrases are highlighted.

Participant: Nope. **I do *not* want to carry, I *don't* want** to be pregnant**. I *don't* want to be pregnant**. Never wanted to be pregnant, **I find it appalling**. Maybe I— Ja, **I do**. For me, **I'm like, it's appalling.** And pregnant women are smug. Like that song. They totally are. No, **I just, I find it, it's grotesque.** It is. No, when **I imagine it for *myself.*** Hideous. **I *never* want to be pregnant**. **I never want to have** that. **I never want to have *that*** come out of me, **I never want to be opened** up and a baby taken out. **I never want** anything to grow inside me that is a person, ever. Or any other animal actually. **I don't want it**. [Italics used to indicate participant emphasis].

The resulting I-Poem which is extracted from the sample paragraph above:

I do *not* want to carry
I *don't* want
I *don't* want to be pregnant
I find it appalling
I do
I'm like, it's appalling
I just
I find it; it's grotesque
I imagine it for *myself.*
I *never* want to be pregnant.
I never want to have
I never want to have *that*
I never want to be opened
I never want
I don't want it.

Appendix F: A working sample of Step 3 "Identifying Contrapuntal Voices"

Different colours are used to highlight different voices during the analysis of one participant's interview:

I think if I were straight, ja, I probably would have had children. So maybe it is as simple as that. Ja…So I do think that, ja, I think this feels like bit of an epiphany moment. Maybe that has a very big weighting on it. I think it's about the perception of the child…It's going to be tough for the child. It's going to be tough for the child to be integrated into and, you know, "Where's your mommy, where's your daddy?" "Oh, no, I don't have one, I've got two mommies." So, and how kids—almost what you're saying, but just to be given the opportunity to have a normal life would have been quite interesting, but here you are, you've been thrown into this situation as a child, so looking at it from the other side, and it's going to be tough for them. I agree with you, if you could have put that child into a gay family and into a straight family, the opportunities might have been very different. Although, in saying that, the child in the gay family might be so loved and be given every opportunity to grow and be nurtured. While you know on the other hand it might be different. Like yes, it's in a straight environment, so it's normal, but it might not be. So the dad might not be, you know what I mean… she has no connection, in terms of the actual child…And that's a bit like, weird…

Appendix G: A working sample of distilled voices

A small sample extract from an identified voice “No Maternal Instinct”, containing identified sections of that voice taken across all participants:

I enjoy children, but that doesn’t mean I want them. You don’t enjoy children, and that’s fine. There’s millions out there like that….I make sure that she doesn’t feel like that’s actually a problem…everyone is speaking about it…she’s got nothing to worry about…she could exorcise it a little bit….I think it’s quite an important voice…children are a big decision. And I think that people just take that too lightly…I’m not particularly fond of children…I don’t think I’ve got the imagination for it…I can really care about them, but like in their wellbeing and whatever—it sounds terrible to say that…I don’t hate them. I couldn’t understand the whole obsession. I really couldn’t….straight people are generally obsessed with having a little version of themselves running around….I just couldn’t understand why you would want children…I don’t think it’s that, I just never had any kind of expectation out of it. I never really quite thought about it.